

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: **EDA**

Illust: **Kochimo**

VOLUME
21





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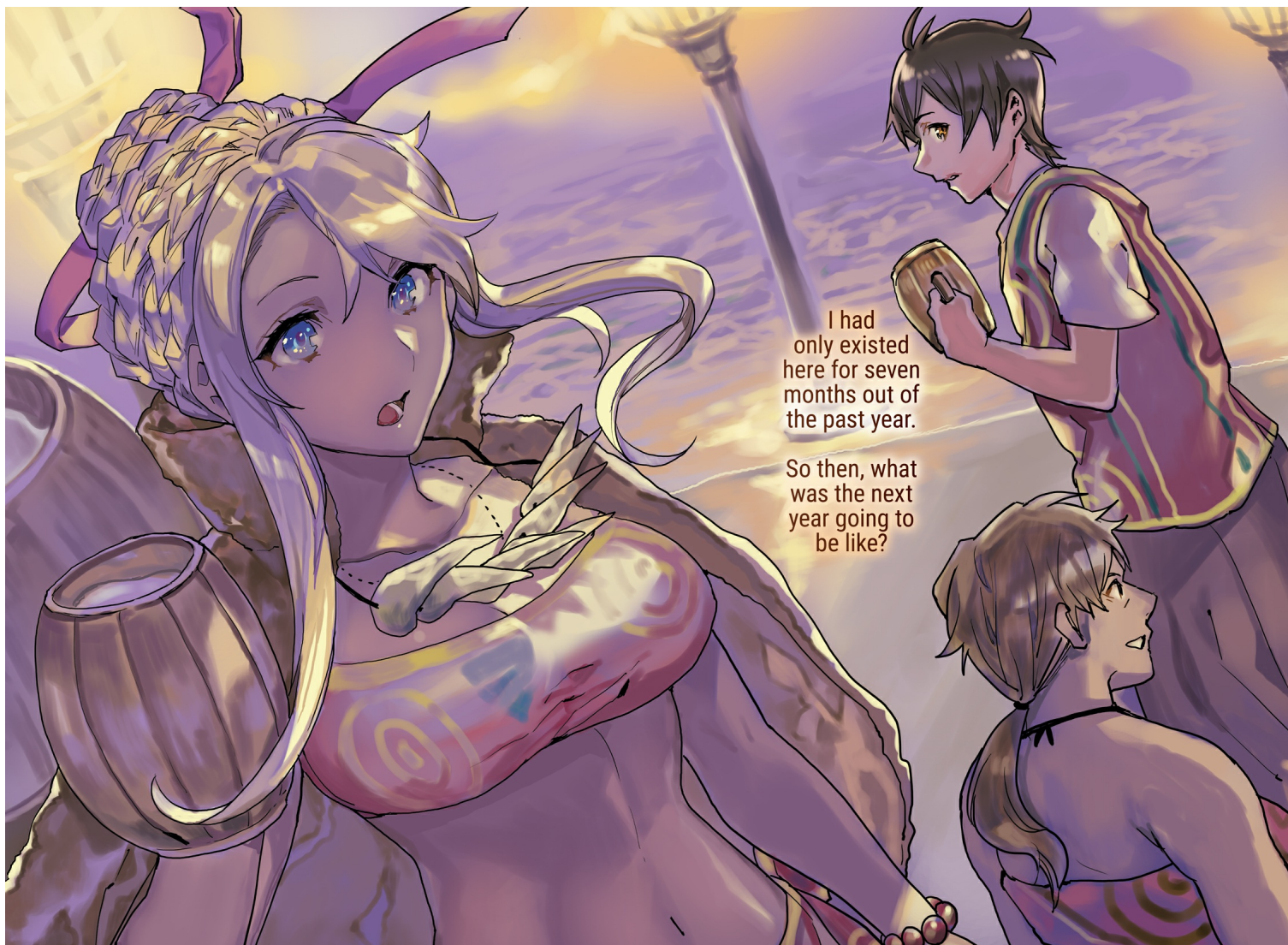
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“You see, I have asked our clan head, Donda, if this old bag of bones could visit the Genos post town...”

Granny Jiba was wearing a gentle smile on her wrinkled face as Mia Lea Ruu attended to her.



I had
only existed
here for seven
months out of
the past year.

So then, what
was the next
year going to
be like?



**“It’s fine,
Asuta. It’s
undoubtedly
a fact that we
lack experience
as chefs.”**

I could even see
frustrated tears
welling up in her
pretty blue eyes.

**“Ah, Varkas,
that’s...”**

I started to say
without thinking,
only for Reina Ruu
to grab my arm.

MENU

Chapter 1: The Ever-Accelerating
Revival Festival

Chapter 2: The Day of the
Sun's Peak

Chapter 3: The Castle Town
and the Revival Festival

Chapter 4: Downfall and Rebirth

Intermezzo: The Young Girl
and the Hunter

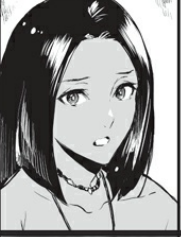
Group Performance:
Mishil the Vegetable Seller



Character Introductions



~ People of the Forest's Edge ~

	Asuta Tsurumi/Asuta A chef-in-training born in Japan. Though he remembers losing his life in a fire, some strange power has taken him to another world.		Ai Fa The only female hunter at the forest's edge. She seems calm and composed at a glance, but hides strong emotions inside. She has made the decision to welcome Asuta into the Fa clan.
	Donda Ruu The head of the Ruu clan, and one of the three leading clan heads of the forest's edge. An exceedingly skilled hunter. He injured his right shoulder in the battle with the lord of the forest.		Jiba Ruu Donda Ruu's grandmother, and the elder of the Ruu clan. Thanks to Asuta's efforts, she regained the strength needed to keep on living. A precious friend to Ai Fa.
	Jiza Ruu The eldest son of the main Ruu house. He has a strict personality and highly values the laws of the forest's edge. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.		Ludo Ruu The youngest son of the main Ruu house. Mischievous by nature. A stronger hunter than most. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.
	Vina Ruu The eldest daughter of the main Ruu house. A peerless seductive beauty. She's been left wavering after Shumiral confessed his love to her.		Reina Ruu The second daughter of the main Ruu house. An excellent chef. She also runs the Ruu clan's stalls.
	Lala Ruu The third daughter of the main Ruu house. A frank girl who has feelings for Shin Ruu.		Rimee Ruu The youngest Ruu daughter. An earnest, innocent child who specializes in making sweets. She adores Ai Fa and Tara.
	Shin Ruu The eldest son and young clan head of a Ruu branch house. He blames himself for the incident in which Asuta was kidnapped, and after much training in the aftermath, he became one of the top eight under the Ruu clan.		Sheera Ruu The eldest daughter of a Ruu branch house, and Shin Ruu's older sister. She has a mild-mannered personality and has hidden feelings for Darmu Ruu.
	Gazraan Rutim The head of the Rutim clan. A calm-natured man with undeniable wisdom. Also a friend without equal to Asuta. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.		Dan Rutim The former head of the Rutim clan. He possesses uncommon strength as a hunter and is a bighearted man. His favorite food is boned ribs.



Rau Lea

The Lea clan head. A hunter with delicate looks but a fierce nature. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.



Toor Deen

Originally belonged to a Suun branch house. She is introverted by nature, but she gives her all to assist Asuta with his business. Her skills at making sweets are blossoming.

~ Townsfolk ~



Myme

Mikel's daughter. Following in her father's footsteps, she has put a great deal of effort into improving her cooking skills. Deeply moved by Asuta's cooking, she is experimenting with giba meat on her own.



Milano Mas

The owner of an inn called The Kimyuus's Tail. A stubborn man with a strong sense of duty. Though he has had issues with the people of the forest's edge, they have been cleared up over time, and he has become a strong supporter of Asuta's.



Naudis

The innkeeper of The Great Southern Tree. As he himself has southern blood, he's quite friendly toward southerners. A fairly skilled chef.



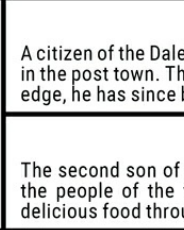
Yumi

The daughter of the owners of an inn called The Westerly Wind. Friendly and cheerful. Sixteen years old. She acts as a bridge between Asuta and her father, who dislikes the people of the forest's edge.



Tara

Dora's daughter. Eight years old. She is becoming close with Rimee Ruu, who is around her age.



Dora

A citizen of the Daleim part of the Genos domain. He sells produce in the post town. Though he once feared the people of the forest's edge, he has since become a strong supporter of Asuta's.

Polarth

The second son of the house of Daleim. A close collaborator for the people of the forest's edge. He has been trying to spread delicious food throughout Genos.



Lefreya

Inherited the title of Countess Turan from the criminal Cycloaeus. She regrets her past crimes and currently lives a humble life.



Diel

The daughter of a metalwork seller from Jagar. She has a boyish appearance and an earnest, direct personality. Currently, she lives in the castle town.



Arishuna Zi Mafraluda

A fortune teller of eastern heritage. Currently, she is staying in the castle town as a guest of Duke Genos.



Varkas

A chef from the castle town. Once was the head chef for the house of Turan. Possesses excellent skills that mark him as one of the foremost chefs in Genos, and has no interest in anything but cooking.

Timalo

A chef from the castle town. The former assistant head chef for the house of Turan. With his haughty personality, he looks down on Asuta while also feeling a sense of rivalry toward the young chef.

Yang

The head chef of the house of Daleim. Currently, he is working hard to promote the flow of new ingredients into the post town.



Roy

A young chef from the castle town. After receiving quite a shock from Reina Ruu and Myme's cooking, he stopped appearing before Asuta and company.



Odifia

Eulifia's young daughter. She doesn't allow her emotions to show, like an expressionless doll, but is exceedingly fond of Toor Deen's sweets.

Eulifia

The wife of Duke Genos's eldest son. A noblewoman who gives off an impression of elegance, though she is actually quite cheerful and unrestrained.

Leeheim

The eldest son of the house of Saturas. He has an arrogant personality, and holds a grudge over how coldly Reina Ruu treated him in the past.

Chapter 1: The Ever-Accelerating Revival Festival

1

On the twenty-third of the violet month, we were once again going about our business as usual, without paying yesterday's incident in the Gamley Troupe's tent any mind.

At last, the sun god's revival festival had properly kicked off. Furthermore, it would be our first time doing business during the day for the festival.

The street was positively packed with people. There really had been a remarkable increase in the amount of foot traffic since yesterday. I had heard many times that the numbers of passersby would double for the festival, and I was really seeing it now, with how bustling the post town had become.

There were red flags dedicated to the sun god flying here and there throughout town, while the numerous visitors who were constantly arriving were walking down the road with their totes and wagons. Easterners with their faces completely hidden by their hoods, southerners wearing flat caps and cloaks over their relatively short frames, and westerners from all over the kingdom—a great many people had gathered here to enjoy the festival, with some aiming to make money at the same time, and they were all coming in along the stone highway. As for us, we were able to watch all the hustle and bustle going on from our stalls, where our sales had already nearly doubled since opening the outdoor restaurant.

“Good morning! This crowd is incredible, isn't it?!”

“Ah, hey there, Myme.”

Myme had showed up around forty to fifty minutes later than us again today, and her eyes were positively sparkling as she stared down at what I was holding in my hands.

“What a lovely aroma. What sort of dish are you selling today?”

“For today, it’s one that uses kimyuus eggs. If I had to give it a name, I guess I’d call it giba meat egg drop soup.”

In a large pot, I had a salty-sweet soup base of tau oil, sugar, and fruit wine simmering away, full of rib meat, aria, nenon, pepe leaves, and the pseudo-brown beech mushroom. To serve it, I would crack an egg over the pot and wait until it was half-solidified, then transfer some of the soup with the egg in it to a deep-dish plate.

I could prepare seven servings of the soup at once, with one egg per customer. Though there was a bit of a line in front of the stall, I had chosen the dish after considering what had happened last night, when we had gone over capacity and hadn’t had enough tableware due to having such a quick turnover of customers.

The customer traffic we were seeing really had skyrocketed compared to the day before yesterday. Since we had borrowed a whole eight stalls’ worth of space last night for the seating, we still had room to spare, but we could easily come up short on the tableware if we weren’t careful.

We’ve got to at least order more tableware and a new canopy today.

If we went and purchased new chairs and tables now, we would have trouble storing them after the revival festival, so we wouldn’t add seating to the newly borrowed space. Instead, we would simply prepare a canopy to guard against sudden rain.

In other words, for today it was just an empty space without anything set up, but the customers paid that fact no heed and ate atop the blankets they brought. It seemed they felt they could just retreat into the thicket to the rear if it started raining.

Meanwhile, the Gamley Troupe’s tent across from us had opened for business when the sun hit its peak, and sure enough, it had even more customers gathered around than the day before yesterday. I would have felt bad if the commotion last night had caused folks to stay away, but apparently that had just been a needless fear. Maybe for a somewhat shady group running a circus tent like them, even something like a bandit attack just made for free publicity.

At any rate, business was going smoothly. While there were quite a few more

folks than usual out and about drinking fruit wine in the middle of the day, peace and order still seemed to be reigning in our restaurant and along the road. There were more guards than usual doing rounds in the area, plus we had a whole twelve hunters keeping watch.

Because of the attack yesterday, we had decided to exercise more caution than usual for the time being. That meant that for the next several days we would be traveling with as many guards as the totes and wagons could carry. With the chefs, guards, and Sufira Zaza coming along as an observer, our group added up to twenty-eight people in total.

Starting today, that number also included a special newcomer: a member of the Beim clan who would be assisting me with the daily specials. The Beim clan stood in opposition to our business in the post town, and they had only now agreed to dispatch someone to act as an observer.

Her name was Fei Beim, and she was the eldest daughter of the main Beim house. She was a bit on the small side, with a short and stout build like her father. Her little eyes always looked displeased, and she wore a frown on her face by default. At nineteen years old, she was older than me but was still unmarried.

She had actually caused a bit of a commotion on her very first day of work. A drunk customer from the west had told her she was being unfriendly, and in response she had snapped at him, saying she couldn't imagine why she would need to be nice to him.

We had somehow managed to settle things with him right away, but I couldn't just overlook her actions. Since the women of the forest's edge had a lot of interactions with ruffians, many of them were quite skilled at serving customers, and since discrimination against the people of the forest's edge had been on a steep decline over the course of the last several months, issues like this had hardly ever cropped up. But that didn't mean anything when it came to today's incident.

"There's no need for you to act friendly, Fei Beim, but could you at least try not to be rude when you're speaking to the customers?" I advised as I dropped fresh eggs into the pot and waited for them to cook, only for her to shoot an

annoyed glare back at me.

“He was the one to act rudely first, so why must I be blamed?”

“I’m not blaming you. However, it’s important to keep your emotions in check when handling customers.”

“So you want me to cast aside my pride and fawn over them for coins?”

“No, I’m certainly not asking that...” I didn’t have much experience dealing with folks like her, so I was left at a bit of a loss.

However, Yamiru Lea then called out from the neighboring stall, “Fei Beim, you’re here to observe the business the Fa and Ruu are doing in the post town and verify what it means for the forest’s edge, correct? I cannot imagine how you could arrive at a proper conclusion if you yourself are interfering with our work.”

Fei Beim turned her way, an even more intense look in her eyes.

However, Yamiru Lea continued, “Furthermore, as your Beim clan is opposed to doing business in the post town, if you continue acting in such a way, it will seem like you were intentionally trying to impede the Fa clan. If you don’t wish to cause unnecessary misunderstandings, you should be more careful with your actions.”

“I can’t see any reason why I should have to listen to such impertinent remarks from the likes of you...”

“Oh, but it’s perfectly reasonable. This is important work that will influence the future of the forest’s edge, so we should all be free to state our opinions.”

Fei Beim offered no retort.

“Not accepting the Fa clan’s actions is a perfectly legitimate stance to hold. But since the decision was made to wait till the next clan head meeting to determine the validity of their business, interfering would be akin to breaking our laws. That’s why I’m saying you should restrain yourself.”

Still the young woman remained silent.

“If you hold such distaste for the work being done here, then there’s no need for you to be the one to join us. Why not trade places with another Beim

woman?” Yamiru Lea mercilessly chided. She was so bold and sharp that she would never back down, even when faced with nobles from the castle town. I couldn’t imagine very many people making an argument like this.

The end result was Fei Beim being left speechless. But then, I noticed clear droplets starting to stream down from her little eyes.

“U-Um, Fei Beim was really moved by the delicious recipes the Fa clan taught us. She asked to be given this task,” the Dagora woman working the giba manju stall with Yamiru Lea hurriedly interjected. Her clan fell under the Beim. “But Fei Beim has trouble handling townsfolk, so things like this can sometimes throw her out of sorts. She most certainly isn’t trying to get in the Fa clan’s way, though, so can’t you please just let it go for now and keep an eye on her in the future?”

“It’s fine. This is all the result of my own inadequacies,” Fei Beim stated, wiping the tears from her eyes and bowing her head deeply. “My apologies. I wish to take a moment to calm down, so I’ll excuse myself for just a short while.”

“Y-Yeah, got it...”

As Fei Beim took off running toward the rear of the wagons, Yamiru Lea gave a heavy sigh.

“This is nothing to go crying over...” she said.

“Sorry. I should have done a better job teaching her how to do this. I guess I misjudged her personality,” I admitted.

“It’s much the same for me. I shouldn’t have butted in.”

Around when the next batch of giba meat egg drop soup servings were done, Fei Beim returned, now with a sturdy stride. She still wore a bit of a sullen look and had red eyes, but she once again bowed her head to me.

“I truly am sorry. I absolutely want to do the best I can at this task, so I hope that you will continue allowing me to work alongside you.”

“Of course. I’m looking forward to working together too.”

And so, that minor incident came to a close.

When I thought about it, I wondered if maybe I had just grown too accustomed to how reliable the women of the Ruu and the clans under them were. The Ruu had been fairly well-off for a long time, and had been honing their minds and bodies to defeat the Suun, making them exceptionally strong and proud, even for people of the forest's edge. Taking Sheera Ruu as an example, she seemed kind of docile, but even she was probably a lot more stout-hearted than most women from the smaller clans.

It wasn't just Fei Beim. I felt like I needed to pay more attention to the women from the Gaaz, Ratsu, and Dagora clans too so that they could adapt to working in the post town and find it both enjoyable and fulfilling.

After that, we continued to be swamped with work. Then, around when the sun hit its peak, Yumi from The Westerly Wind showed up. She had kept working hard late into the evening yesterday, and she looked to be full of energy again today.

"We prepared a hundred servings of okonomiyaki again for today! If I sell all of them, my old man's sure to be left speechless!"

Meanwhile, Myme had prepared eighty servings of her dish, which was apparently her limit. But she was seeing even more customers than we were, so she would definitely be closing up shop first again today.

Out on the street, Pino and company had begun performing again to attract customers, drawing cheers from the passersby. Things got even more packed along the road now that the sun had hit its peak, leading to shouts of "To the sun god!"

Another commotion occurred when we were getting close to the lower first hour. That was when an extravagant totes-drawn wagon approached us from the north. While both totes and wagons passed by frequently, this one had the emblem of a count displayed upon it and was guarded by soldiers guiding totes of their own. That could only mean Polarth was visiting for the first time in a while.

"It certainly has been some time, Sir Asuta. I'm glad to find you looking well."

When Polarth's plump figure descended from the wagon, a wave of murmurs spread out across the street. For folks who had only arrived here in Genos

recently, it must have been their first time seeing a noble visit our stalls. It had been roughly a month since I had last seen Polarth, myself.

“I’m glad you seem to be doing well too. If I remember correctly, I haven’t seen you since around when we were opening the restaurant.”

“Yes, I believe it was still the indigo month then. Just like you, I have been so busy it has made my head spin.”

Despite that, his plump face was smiling as brightly as always, and he looked to be doing well both mentally and physically.

Polarth was easily the noble we were closest to. Looking back, he had helped to rescue me when I had been kidnapped by Lefreya, and after the crimes of the house of Turan had been exposed, we had worked together to help with the spread of new ingredients. In spite of his nonchalant appearance, he was a very earnest man with a strong and refined sense for business, and he was pretty energetic too.

“You helped us out quite a bit with the tea party the other day. Once Eulifia sets her mind on something, even Duke Genos himself can have difficulty reining her in. But, well, I too have made my fair share of unreasonable requests of Duke Genos over the years, and I have long been grateful for how accommodating he is,” Polarth said as he peered into the pot. The customer from Jagar who was waiting for it to be ready stepped aside with a frown, but he remained close by so as not to give up his space in line. “Yes, today you have yet another dish that greatly stirs my appetite. From what I hear, Lady Arishuna was able to return to the castle town with your cooking, using a dish she brought herself, correct? If I did the same, would I also be able to bring back whatever dishes I pleased?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well then, I shall send along an envoy later! Yes, I’m truly looking forward to it!” Polarth exclaimed, only to lower his voice and say, “By the way, I have a matter I would like to discuss in private. Would it be possible to borrow a bit of your time?”

“Huh? You mean now? But I can’t leave the stall until we’re done with business for the day...”

“It will not take long. And it is a matter I would like to have approval from the Ruu clan on as well.”

For Polarth to come out personally like this, it must have been about something even more complicated than the tea party from last time. Even so, I couldn't leave the stall at the moment, so I finished serving the current batch and added another round of fresh eggs, then moved toward the back so we could talk.

Polarth was accompanied by two soldiers, while I called over Ludo Ruu from the restaurant space. Since Jiza and Darmu Ruu had needed to report on the events of last night to Donda Ruu in detail, they had refrained from joining us as guards today.

“My apologies for bothering you during this busy period of the revival festival, but we would like to have you show your skills once again in the castle town, Sir Asuta.”

“So, it's a request to cook in the castle town?”

Well, that was about what I had expected. Pretty much all I could do was cook, so I couldn't imagine him asking anything else of me. I really just wanted to focus on my first-ever revival festival. But still, it wasn't like I could refuse a request from a noble out of hand, so I had to hear him out.

“It isn't anything that would take up all that much of your time. You recall how Sir Welhide requested that you think up delicious dishes using fuwano and mamaria from Banarm? We feel that now is the time to unveil them.”

“Right... It's been over a month now since I was asked to do that. But why in the middle of the revival festival of all times?”

“I would say it is precisely *because* it is the revival festival. We happen to have run low on ways to entertain the envoys, so we would like to borrow your assistance.”

Duke Marstein Genos was the lord of the land who ruled over the people of the forest's edge, so it would have been difficult for us to refuse his orders, no matter how dictatorial they were, but Marstein and Polarth still chose to make this an honest request.

Still, considering how he had chided Eulifia for trying to summon me to the castle town before, he must have had a good reason for this new solicitation. From what I could presume, it would make sense that someone from the group of envoys from Banarm to whom he was indebted was pestering him to make this request.

We owed a debt to the people of Banarm as well. After all, it was none other than the Suun clan who had attacked the envoys they had sent ten years back, leading to trade being cut off between the towns.

As I checked how well the eggs had congealed with a wooden spoon, I racked my brains. “Hmm... Well, as long as it’s not a holiday or the day before, and the meal takes place in the evening...it’s possible I could somehow manage to visit the castle town while still keeping up with my business...”

“We will leave the date to you. Since we will be having elaborate feasts on each of the holidays, we would also appreciate avoiding them.”

“In that case, what about the twenty-eighth or the twenty-ninth?” I replied, though my hesitation must have been showing on my face.

Polarth’s eyebrows drooped as he replied, “I am truly sorry to be imposing on you like this, considering it has only been half a month or so since the tea party. But the other chefs who have accepted the job are already preparing, and I would very much like to see you show off your skills alongside them.”

“Other chefs...? Is Varkas one of them, then?”

“Indeed. It will be Sir Varkas, Sir Timalo, and Yang.”

That was certainly quite the distinguished group. Now that I thought about it, Bozl—one of Varkas’s apprentices—hadn’t stopped by in a while, so I hadn’t heard his master’s opinion of my giba curry yet.

After hesitating for a bit, I replied, “All right. But as always, this isn’t something I can decide on my own, so I’ll ask my clan head and the leading clan heads to consider the matter.”

My clan head, Ai Fa, had of course been standing there by my side from the start. Meanwhile, Ludo Ruu had his hands joined behind his head with a relaxed grin.

“My old man and the others won’t interfere with anything that has to do with cooking or business. Still, you’ve got it tough, Asuta... Anyway, I’ve just got to let my dad know, right?”

But Polarth wasn’t done. “Actually, I have another matter I wish to discuss with the Ruu clan. You see, we would also like to hold a martial arts exhibition on that same date.”

“Martial arts? What, are you telling us to participate in a contest of strength?”

“Yes, that’s exactly it. Or to be more precise, a contest of swordsmanship,” Polarth replied, the look on his face growing even more serious. “Of course, the participants will be using practice swords without proper blades and will also be given leather armor to wear, so there will be no risk of deadly injury. We would like to ask the hunter Shin Ruu to take part in the contest.”

“Shin Ruu? Why him?”

“That Shin Ruu man came to the castle town for the tea party, correct? The ladies who participated have been requesting him most emphatically. Lady Besta of Viscount Talfon’s house and Lady Selanju of Viscount Madel’s house, to be precise. Do you recall them, Sir Asuta?”

“Yeah, more or less.”

I had forgotten their names, but I remembered there being two unfamiliar noblewomen aside from Eulifia’s young daughter. Their excitement had been pretty obvious, and the two of them had almost seemed like sisters.

“The house of Viscount Talfon has ties to the house of Saturas. Lady Besta was saying she wished to invite Shin Ruu to the castle town once more, and upon hearing that, Sir Leeheim suggested we hold this exhibition.”

Leeheim had been deeply impressed by giba meat at first, but after an incident between him and Reina Ruu, his attitude toward us had grown pretty chilly. Before that, he had supposedly been planning to buy up all the giba meat he possibly could for the castle town, yet now he was perhaps the noble we were most wary of.

“It seems Duke Genos sensed Sir Leeheim would cause further trouble were this request to be rejected, so he went ahead and accepted it. Since Sir Leeheim

is Count Saturas's first son, he is not someone either the people of the forest's edge or myself can afford to ignore."

"Right, I understand."

The house of Saturas ruled over the post town, and since we were doing business here, we needed to be even more cautious of him.

"Sir Leeheim's uncle is an especially famed swordsman here in Genos. If my memory does not fail me, I cannot recall him being defeated by anyone but Sir Melfried. That is the man who wishes to have a contest of swordsmanship with Shin Ruu."

"Hmm? I don't really get it. If Shin Ruu beats a nobleman like him, won't it just turn into even more of a hassle?"

"Ah, no. We are talking about a contest, so there are to be no grudges held, regardless of the outcome. In fact, I would imagine that it is Duke Genos's hope that the hunter from the forest's edge will prove victorious. I'm asking out of my own personal curiosity, but a hunter from the forest's edge couldn't possibly lose, could he?"

"That would depend on how the contest is decided. But if that noble is as skilled as Melfried, even Shin Ruu may not be able to win."

Ai Fa had once said that Melfried was similar to Jiza Ruu in skill. As a matter of fact, he was the one who had fought and defeated Tei Suun.

But Ludo Ruu still only said he might not be able to win against Melfried. Have the Ruu clan's hunters really gotten that much stronger in such a short time?

Jiza Ruu had beaten Shin Ruu in the previous contest of strength, as well as Gazraan Rutim, who had won against Ludo Ruu. If Leeheim's uncle and Melfried were still equal, then Shin Ruu would have no way of winning, especially considering the fact that Shin Ruu still hadn't even beaten Ludo Ruu.

But if Shin Ruu had gained a similar level of skill to Melfried in such a short time, Ludo Ruu, Jiza Ruu, and Gazraan Rutim had to have reached even greater heights still. I didn't have anything against Melfried, but that thought still made me happy as a person of the forest's edge.

“Hmm, I’m not so certain. After all, Sir Melfried is a head above all others as a swordsman, so I have my doubts that even Sir Leeheim’s uncle could be placed on his level.”

“Well, in that case, I can’t imagine how Shin Ruu could lose. No matter how complicated you make the rules, he’ll definitely win in any contest with a sword.”

“I see. That is most reassuring,” Polarth remarked with a broad smile. “Sir Leeheim is hardly any kind of serious, crafty schemer. In fact, he isn’t particularly strong-willed by any measure, so if he sees the strength of a hunter from the forest’s edge firsthand, I believe he will lose his motivation to get up to such mischief in the future. And once Sir Leeheim falters, Duke Genos likely plans to give him a thorough lecture about meddling with the people of the forest’s edge.”

“What a hassle. But, well, if you really want to challenge one of our relatives, I can’t see my old man refusing that either.”

“It would certainly be a huge help. Well then, can I ask you to convey this official request from Duke Marstein Genos to Donda Ruu, the leading clan head of the forest’s edge?”

“Got it. Still, I’d love it if I could take that nobleman on myself,” Ludo Ruu replied with a bold grin, bringing our meeting with Polarth to a close.

And so, it was decided that we would need to head to the castle town between the day of the sun’s peak and the day of the downfall.

2

“Shin Ruu is going to have a contest of strength with a noble in the castle town...? No doubt Lala will be getting all worked up again once she hears about this...” Vina Ruu remarked after we wrapped up work for the day.

“Yeah, especially considering that this is all happening because a bunch of noble girls are saying they want him there. Lala’s face will probably end up turning as red as her hair,” Ludo Ruu chimed in with a none-too-serious expression. “Now that I think about it, Rimee was going on and on about how

good Shin Ruu looked dressed up like a swordsman from the castle town or whatever. I can't even imagine it. Is he really so handsome that a bunch of noble girls would start losing their heads over him?" he asked Toor Deen, who was cleaning up the neighboring stall.

"Ah, huh?" Toor Deen hesitantly responded, but then she gave a little nod. "W-With the way Shin Ruu and Ai Fa both looked, it was almost hard to believe they were people of the forest's edge. This may not be much of a compliment, but it's easy for me to see how someone might have mistaken them for nobles."

"Hmm... Well, hopefully it doesn't turn into a big hassle like what happened with Reina. After all, there's no way folks like that would ever cast aside their status as nobles to marry into the forest's edge."

Right. Leeheim had been head over heels for Reina Ruu, only to then turn completely cold toward her and start fostering ill will against the people of the forest's edge. While Marstein had told him off and pointed out how he was at fault, it still felt necessary to be on guard for this upcoming event.

"Well, there are *some* folks out there who're eccentric enough to give up their status and even their god in order to marry someone. Not very many, but some," Ludo Ruu noted.

"You just had to go and say it. You really can run your mouth, Ludo..." poor Vina Ruu replied with reddened cheeks.

Her brother just chuckled at her expense.

As for me, when I thought about Shumiral, who had been gone for four months now, I sighed to myself. "All right, let's get out of here. There's still a lot left to do today."

With those last words from me, we departed down the bustling road.

Our group was a big one, with four wagons, five stalls, six totes, and twenty-eight people in total. The women who didn't have to help move everything rode along in the wagons, but we still attracted no small amount of attention with this many people of the forest's edge marching along. After saying farewell to Yumi, who was still working hard, we passed in front of the Gamley Troupe's rather lively tent and kept on heading south.

We then split up into groups. One to return the stalls, another to purchase ingredients for tomorrow, a third to exchange the impressive number of coins we had earned, a fourth to put in an order for new tableware and a canopy...and today, we even had a group to taste test some stall food. Naudis of The Great Southern Tree had put out a stall of his own, starting last night, and so Reina Ruu, Toor Deen, and I were planning on giving that a try.

“Well then, once we all finish our separate work, we’ll meet up at The Kimyuus’s Tail,” I said.

“Right. Take care...” Vina Ruu replied.

The three of us were accompanied by Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, and Rau Lea, and we broke off first. Naudis was set up rather far toward the southern end of the stall area.

“Yes, it’s definitely busy around here.”

Just as Reina Ruu said, there were nearly ten customers lined up there. It was past the lower second hour at this point, so the lunch rush was already over, but there was no sign that the number of customers around was trailing off. As we joined the end of the line, the southerner in front of us turned our way with a suspicious look.

“What, you’re going out of your way to pay for giba cooking from somewhere else?”

He must have known who we were. I gave him a friendly smile and replied, “Yes. The owner here is an acquaintance, so we’re really interested in seeing what sort of dish he’s selling.”

“Yeah, the owner has some impressive skills. I was torn over where to eat today, myself, but in the end I decided to come here,” the man said with a grin. “I’ll be heading over to your stalls tomorrow, though. You’re not planning on taking any time off during the festival, right?”

“Of course not.”

It seemed he wasn’t just acquainted with us, he was a regular. A lot of folks from Jagar looked kind of similar, so I sometimes had trouble telling them apart. Same thing with people from Sym.

“Welcome.” Not long after our turn arrived, Naudis greeted us with a smile. “Ah, Asuta and Reina Ruu, I hear your business is running smoothly too.”

The owner of The Great Southern Tree was running the stall himself. Today he had a gray cloth wrapped around his head, with his abundant dark-brown hair spreading out in the back. It made me smile in amusement.

“Because of all that trouble last night, we weren’t able to stop by, but we’ve really been looking forward to this.”

“Yes, that sounded like quite the hardship. At any rate, I’m proud of both of my dishes. I hope they’ll satisfy you.”

Naudis was selling two different dishes at his stall. Just like with the pasta at our place, he had two braziers set up to handle both at the same time. One of them was curry, while the other looked to be a dish boiled in tau oil. He had a stack of thin baked poitan prepared, which he used to wrap around the ingredients.

“Each of them costs one and a half coins. How many do you want?”

“In that case, we’ll take two of each.”

We had three chefs, but a half-portion seemed like plenty for a time like this. If anything was left over, we could offer it to the hunters, who had heartier appetites than we did.

As I was considering my options, though, Ludo Ruu added, “Ah, could we get one of each too?”

“Huh? You want to try it too?”

“Yeah. It uses giba meat, right? Stuff made by townsfolk can be kinda interesting.”

Now that I thought about it, Ludo Ruu had purchased Myme’s and Yumi’s cooking too while on guard duty. Not many men of the forest’s edge would spend money to purchase a meal from the townsfolk, so this was certainly a welcome change to see.

“Well then, that’ll be three of each, correct? Please go ahead and get your money ready.”



Both of the dishes were rather juicy, which was why Naudis prepared them like manju. It was a pretty popular style for snacks here in the post town. After moving out of the way for the next customer, we stepped off to the side of the stall and split up the dishes, then all took a bite.

As expected, the boiled dish did have a tau oil base, and it seemed like it might have used sugar and just a bit of that cinnamon-like herb. Naudis was well acquainted with how to utilize tau oil, and he had prepared a simple, gentle flavor here. As for ingredients, he went with coarsely chopped giba thigh meat, aria, tino, and nenon.

For the curry manju, he had taken another unexpected leap forward. The ingredients he used included the daikon-like sheema, taro-esque ma gigo, zucchini-like chan, and the shiitake and brown beech-like mushrooms, adding up to an impressive variety of ingredients from Jagar.

The curry roux itself was also remarkably sweeter than the last time I'd had it. It was about as sweet as the kind meant for kids back in my home country. You couldn't get it this sweet just by adding sugar or honey. It was pretty mild in terms of spiciness too, giving it a unique flavor and richness that stood apart from ordinary curry.

"Naudis, how exactly did you make this curry?"

"Ah, well, I only used about two-thirds as much of the curry base and included plenty of aria and fuwano sautéed in milk fat. I also used an equal amount of karon milk and water, and added a good bit of sugar and grated ramam fruit."

"I see. So this richness is from the karon milk. And the vegetables I don't use in my own curry give it a delicious flavor all its own."

"The curries you and the owner of The Kimyuus's Tail prepare are really delicious, so I wanted to make something just as good that all my customers from Jagar could enjoy," Naudis replied with a smile while handing a curry manju over to a customer. "My curry has been extremely popular, both here at my stall and at my inn. Furthermore, I feel like more and more of my customers from Jagar are ordering it now. You also serve curry at your stalls, so by the time the revival festival wraps up, I'm sure everyone will know that it isn't a dish from Sym."

“That’s true. It would make me really happy if the people of Genos would accept an eccentric dish like curry.”

To be perfectly honest, I would never add the daikon-like sheema or taro-esque ma gigo to curry. However, it wasn’t like they threw off the balance of the dish, and for people unfamiliar with what curry was originally supposed to be like, it might be easy to accept his recipe since they had no reason to think there was anything different about it. It was a whole new flavor brought about by combining the cooking of my old world with that of this new one.

“There aren’t many people from the forest’s edge who dislike the spiciness of curry, so I haven’t put much thought into it, but you really did a good job of mellowing it out by increasing the amount of aria and fuwano,” Reina Ruu remarked with a smile toward Naudis after eating each of her half-servings. “I never would have come up with this. It’s very impressive.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Naudis replied with a warm smile of his own.

The next person to offer their impression was Toor Deen, who bashfully said, “It’s delicious. Especially this dish with the tau oil. It doesn’t seem to use anything but sugar and a few herbs, but it has such a deep flavor.”

“Yes, I used a very small amount of sparkling wine from Jagar in the dish. I can’t use a lot due to the cost, but it really does go so well with tau oil.”

I hadn’t picked up on that at all. It didn’t seem to have added anything in particular to the flavors that were present, but apparently it acted as a barely detectable accent that helped to heighten the taste of the dish.

“Hmm. Not many Lea women can make anything on this level. It’s a bit frustrating, honestly,” Rau Lea whispered.

“Yeah, but I like the curry Asuta and Reina make better,” Ludo Ruu said, also taking care to keep Naudis from overhearing. Ai Fa ate the leftover half-serving but maintained a composed expression and offered no comments.

“Now that I think about it, did you manage to sell out today, Asuta?”

“Yeah. We managed to sell the last of it right on schedule.”

“For reference, could I ask how much that was? I’ve prepared seventy

servings of each of my two dishes.”

“Well, on my end we had 160 poitan wraps, 200 carbonara, and 150 of the daily special—giba meat egg drop soup. The Ruu clan had 350 servings of the teriyaki meat stew and 160 of the myamuu giba.”

It was essentially the same as last night, with only the daily special increasing by thirty meals. It took over an hour longer for us to sell out compared to yesterday, but I was still perfectly satisfied with how we managed to sell everything. Naudis, however, looked astounded when he heard that.

“Those are some truly incredible numbers. A normal stall would be happy if they could sell even fifty meals, or a hundred during the festival.”

“Yeah. But you prepared 140 meals for a single stall yourself, right? So that’s pretty impressive too.”

“Yes, since there aren’t any other stalls selling giba cooking in the area. I hesitated over whether to open my stall near yours right up until the end, but if we can both sell out of everything, I believe I made the right choice,” Naudis said as he stared out at the street. While none of them were selling giba meat, there were a ton of snack stalls about. They all seemed to be getting a good number of customers too, though not as many as Naudis’s. “So many new ingredients have become available in the post town over the last two months. Tau oil, sugar, karon milk, milk fat, reten oil, mamaria vinegar, herbs from Sym, all sorts of vegetables... It’s even been possible to purchase karon torso meat lately. I’m sure anyone who’s visiting Genos for the first time in a while must be absolutely astounded.”

“I’m sure you’re right.”

“Still, there’s only a couple shops that handle giba meat right now, and I suspect there aren’t many more that use those other new ingredients well. Our prospective customers are being distracted by all these other stalls for now, but I believe as time passes, more and more of them will be coming our way,” Naudis said, brimming with confidence as he smiled brightly at me. He must have been proud of the fact that not many people out there could make use of ingredients from Jagar as well as he could. Just like with Nail and his Sym-style cooking, I felt that Naudis’s dishes really got at the core of the food culture of

Jagar. “At any rate, I would like to increase my order by twenty servings of giba leg meat next time. Will that be a problem?”

“No, I believe that should be fine, but I’ll confirm it once we get back to the settlement.”

“Right, I’m counting on you... Ah, welcome!”

It didn’t seem like he was getting any breaks from the constant flow of customers, so we said our farewells and departed.

I was glad to call Naudis a comrade, perhaps even more so than Myme and Yumi. It was because of them, Milano Mas, and Nail that we had been able to spread the delicious taste of giba meat as widely as we had in the post town. This revival festival was certain to be a huge turning point for the people of the forest’s edge.

I continued to think about such things for some time as we returned to the settlement.

Half an hour passed after that.

We had finished up all our work and returned safely to the Ruu settlement, where we found Rimee Ruu waiting there at the plaza for some reason.

“Welcome back, Reina and Vina! And you too, Asuta and Ai Fa!”

“Right, thanks. What are you doing here, Rimee Ruu?”

“I was waiting for you! Papa Donda said he has something he wants to discuss.”

It was rare for Donda Ruu to summon us like this. But only Reina Ruu, Ludo Ruu, and I had been requested, so we headed to the main Ruu house along with Ai Fa. Meanwhile, Toor Deen departed with Fafa and one of the wagons. She would be getting started on some prep work for us back at the Fa house.

“That’s convenient. It’ll give us a chance to tell my old man about the stuff that noble guy said. Save us a bit of trouble.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

We stepped into the main house under Mia Lea Ruu's guidance, where we found not only Donda Ruu, but also Jiza, Darmu, and even Granny Jiba waiting for us. Mia Lea Ruu knelt down beside Granny Jiba, while the five of us sat facing Donda Ruu.

"Welcome back, Reina and Ludo. There weren't any more problems today, were there?"

"No. Those traveling performers seemed to be working as usual too."

"I see," Donda Ruu replied, but then he held his tongue.

His right shoulder was still wrapped in bandages, and his arm was in a sling. He had suffered the greatest injuries in the battle with the lord of the forest, and it would still be another month before he was fully healed.

"Asuta of the Fa clan, Reina, Ludo...there's something I'd like to have you all confirm."

"What's got you acting so formal?" Ludo Ruu asked.

"Just be quiet and listen. Our elder, Jiba, has made a stunning request."

In surprise, I turned toward Granny Jiba. She was wearing a gentle smile on her wrinkled face as Mia Lea Ruu attended to her.

"You see, I have asked our clan head, Donda, if this old bag of bones could visit the Genos post town..."

"Huh?! You want to go to the post town, Jiba Ruu?"

"Yes, that's right... Things have changed quite a bit there, haven't they? I want to see what the work all of you have been doing has accomplished with my own eyes..."

I was at a loss for words and glanced around to my left and right at everyone. Rimee and Ludo Ruu were staring blankly, Reina Ruu wore a serious look, and Ai Fa was calmly listening to Granny Jiba's words.

"It's been somewhere in the range of twenty to thirty years now since I last went into town... Once I could no longer handle shopping, I had no reason left to go there... Back then, the townsfolk still feared us people of the forest's edge... All the more because some of our hunters were committing criminal acts

against them, including even murder...”

In response to her words, Ludo Ruu gave a relaxed reply of, “Yeah. There was that one time where some criminals were captured by the guards, and then the head of a clan butted in to get revenge for one of his clan members, right? Well, it’s not like I can’t understand how he felt.”

“Indeed... And after that, the townsfolk came to fear us even more... But their attitude has changed quite a bit thanks to you all, correct?”

“That isn’t just because of the stalls, but because everyone from the forest’s edge worked to take down those villainous nobles and the Suun clan,” I said.

“Yes, that’s true... At any rate, I would like to see how the town has changed before my soul returns to the forest...”

“Your soul isn’t going to the forest soon, is it?” Rimee Ruu asked with tears in her eyes, only for Granny Jiba to give her an even gentler smile.

“Oh, I’m doing just fine. But I’d like to head into town while that’s still true... If I get much older, I won’t be able to handle that kind of strain anymore...”

“It’s true that it could be difficult for your body to handle the trip...” I said, giving the matter some thought. “The path between the settlement and the post town is pretty narrow and sloped, so the wagon will sway a good bit. It won’t take all that long, but it could still do quite a number on your stamina.”

“But we’ll be there the whole time in town, so it wouldn’t be dangerous at all. That’s what you wanted to talk about, right, dad?” Ludo Ruu asked.

“Yes, that’s true. You all understand the current state of the post town better than anyone. I want you to tell me honestly whether or not doing this would expose our elder to any danger,” Donda Ruu replied, his eyes deadly serious.

With a confident look on his face, Ludo Ruu gave a shrug. “As long as we bring along hunters as skilled as we had yesterday, there shouldn’t be anything to worry about. She can just ride along when we come to a busy area.”

“But there are a lot of outsiders and outlaws in the post town right now. I’m certain you haven’t forgotten about the group that attacked you last night,” Jiza Ruu calmly interjected.

“Hmph,” Ludo Ruu snorted. “Even then, we didn’t get a scratch on us, right? And it’s safer during the day than at night.”

“But if anything were to happen to our elder...we would have no choice but to take up arms like that clan head from decades ago, correct?” Suddenly, there was an intense invisible pressure coming from Jiza Ruu’s large frame.

Ludo Ruu was a bit taken aback, but he steeled himself to face his brother head-on. “We just have to give our all to make sure that doesn’t happen, yeah? Besides, whether Granny Jiba is there or not, it won’t change what our job is... No matter what sort of crazy stuff may happen, we’ll still have to guard our brethren to make sure they don’t get harmed in any way.”

Ludo Ruu had felt like a kid to me when I first met him, but now he was enduring the full intensity of the aura Jiza Ruu was giving off.

Then Reina Ruu interjected, saying, “I would like to grant Granny Jiba’s wish. The chance to see the townsfolk interacting with us people of the forest’s edge and eating giba meat... I think it would be an incredibly precious experience.”

“Yeah! I’m sure Granny Jiba will love the town too!” Rimee Ruu chimed in, wiping the tears from her eyes and smiling.

Granny Jiba looked upon the young girl’s expression with a kindly gaze. “Oh? You’ve come to love the town, Rimee?”

“I really have! That’s where I met Tara! There are lots of nice people there, like Dora, Yumi, Myme, Mikel, and Telia Mas too!”

“I see...” Granny Jiba said, her eyes drifting downward. “Up until recently, it would have been unthinkable for anyone from the forest’s edge to think of people from town so fondly, wouldn’t you say? I’d like to see with my own two eyes what made Rimee come to feel this way...”

“It’ll be fine. Our elder should get to know everything that’s going on,” Ludo Ruu said.

“I think so as well. And if we pile up a lot of bedding, that should make the swaying during the trip less of a burden on her,” Reina Ruu added.

Then Donda Ruu shot a piercing gaze my way. In response, I made up my

mind and gave a large nod. “As far as guarding her goes, I can’t really add anything to what Ludo Ruu said, but I believe this trip will be important for Jiba Ruu, so that she can learn about the current state of the town. Actually, more than that, I should say it would make me so happy if we could show it to her, considering she’s lived longer than anyone else here at the forest’s edge.”

“I see...” Donda Ruu said, his huge body swaying. “In that case, we will fulfill the elder’s request. Allow me to choose the guards. Jiza...”

“Yes?”

“You’ll stay here in the settlement to protect the house,” Donda Ruu said, breaking out in a grin like some wild beast. “Tomorrow, I’ll be going personally.”

3

And so, Granny Jiba and Donda Ruu ended up coming along with us to the post town on the following day, the twenty-fourth of the violet month.

This was no small matter. After all, Granny Jiba was the only one in all the forest’s edge who remembered living in the black forest, and now she was heading to the post town. Just as Jiza Ruu had suggested, on the off chance that something were to happen to her, the hunters under the Ruu would inevitably have to value the laws of the forest’s edge over those of the town and move to retaliate against the criminal behind the act.

Of course, it wasn’t like the fact that she was the elder actually made anything more dangerous. To the townsfolk, she wouldn’t seem like anyone special, so there was no real reason for her to be targeted. From that perspective, you could even say the young women dealing with drunkards and ruffians were in far more danger.

Bottom line: what everyone was actually concerned about was, ultimately, the unforeseeable. There was always a danger of getting caught up in something by pure coincidence, like what had occurred the day before last. In such a situation, Granny Jiba would be even less capable of defending herself than Rimee Ruu. If something happened to her... Well, I could easily understand Jiza Ruu’s concern.

As a result, the number of hunters who would be acting as guards had gone up to a total of sixteen. Six of them had been assigned to protecting Granny Jiba alone, while the other ten would watch over us chefs. Since there wouldn't be enough room for that many people in the wagons, a number of them would walk to the post town in advance and then meet up with us.

The list of hunters we were bringing was even more distinguished than the group we had for the day of dawn. The familiar members included Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, Darmu Ruu, Shin Ruu, Gazraan Rutim, Dan Rutim, Rau Lea, Giran Ririn, and Ji Maam. The rest were supposedly strong hunters from among the subordinates of the Ruu.

The wagon Granny Jiba and Donda Ruu were riding in also carried two hunters on the inside, with four more walking outside, and was heading straight to the stall area without any diversions. After borrowing our stalls, we caught up to them. At that point, we heard from Sheera and Lala Ruu (who had accompanied Granny Jiba) that the townsfolk and the guards seemed like they hadn't noticed anything special about our newly increased presence, or at the very least, they weren't worried about it.

Then, once we arrived at our usual space, we set about parking the wagons. As always, we left them and the tolos in the open area behind the stalls, where they wouldn't get in the way. We made sure leave the south end of the space back there free for Jidura's wagon, since it was going to need to get in and out during our business hours so that Myme could use it to come and go, while Ruuruu's wagon that Granny Jiba had ridden in was parked between the ones pulled by Gilulu and Fafa.

Ludo Ruu and Dan Rutim stayed by Granny Jiba's side constantly, and there were four particularly tough hunters encircling the wagon. Darmu Ruu, Gazraan Rutim, Rau Lea, and Giran Ririn had been chosen for that task.

"That's quite a heavy guard, considering it's far from likely that any brigands will even appear," Fei Beim sullenly remarked as she worked alongside me at the stall.

"Yeah, but if something were to happen, it wouldn't just impact the Ruu clan. It could completely destroy the relationship between Genos and the forest's

edge. I suspect nothing they could do to prevent that would be overkill, under the circumstances.”

“I know that Jiba Ruu is someone who should be respected, considering she’s lived longer than any of us...”

That alone was enough, I figured. But I understood that Fei Beim’s displeased look came from her nervousness and unease.

At any rate, once all of our personnel were in place, Granny Jiba’s small figure finally appeared from under the canopy. She took a seat at the edge of the wagon’s bed, where Donda Ruu soon sat down next to her. Then, Ludo Ruu and Dan Rutim took up positions on either side of them. It felt as if we were starting work with a figure of worship staring at us from behind.

“Why don’t you accompany Granny Jiba today, Ai Fa?” I proposed, only for my clan head to calmly shake her head.

“She surely feels safe with Ludo Ruu and Dan Rutim by her side. I simply need carry out my own work.”

Well, there were only two meters or so between the stalls and the wagon. Since they could easily call out to us at any time, perhaps there wasn’t really any need to be concerned.

At any rate, we went ahead and opened for business. As soon as we did, none of our customers bothered to pay any more attention to what might have been going on behind our stalls. Since we were all nice and calm too, we were able to concentrate on our work just like always.

For today’s daily special, we had giba cutlets for the first time in five days. Due to the amount we were preparing, I had given up on using lard and switched to reten oil instead.

Reten oil was a type of vegetable-based oil with a flavor similar to olive oil. While the people of the forest’s edge were especially fond of giba cutlets made using lard, it wasn’t as if using reten oil instead seriously impacted the taste. If I had to say, the taste was probably a bit more refreshing compared to using lard, and the coating seemed to have a lighter crunch to it.

Once again, I found that the giba cutlets were extremely well-liked. There

were even some customers who told us they had been itching for another chance to try them. The giba and nanaar carbonara—which took the most effort to prepare—was off for the day, and the giba cutlets stall had the longest of the lines.

Around when the sun was approaching its peak, both Myme and Yumi showed up. When Yumi noticed the presence of Granny Jiba's group for the first time, she said, "Huh?" with a tilt of her head. "Isn't that the leading clan head from the Ruu? He's here in town even though by the look of it his injuries aren't fully healed yet?"

"Yeah. He's accompanying the elder today."

"The elder? Oh, that little old lady, huh? Is she the grandmother of Ludo Ruu and the others?"

"No, Jiba Ruu is actually Donda Ruu's grandmother, so she's their great-grandmother."

"Wow. Someone from the forest's edge has lived *that* long?! Myme, let's go say hi. Uh, do you want to come too, Luia?"

Luia was the girl who assisted Yumi with her work. She had a more reserved personality than her friend, which probably meant she was feeling overwhelmed by the guarded feeling in the air, as she hurriedly shook her head from side to side.

While I fried up some fresh cutlets in the pot, I glanced over at Yumi and Myme.

"Ah, you're the girls from town who have been selling giba cooking, correct...? I'm very grateful to both of you..." I could faintly hear Granny Jiba say.

Then Yumi energetically replied, "Asuta and the Ruu clan have helped us out a whole bunch too! I hope that we can keep on working together!"

"Pleased to meet you," Myme added with a polite bow of her head.

This was their second encounter with Donda Ruu, and since the familiar faces of Ludo Ruu and Dan Rutim were present, neither of the girls lost their nerve while greeting Granny Jiba.

“Ah, right! Leading clan head and honored elder, would you like to try my cooking? It’s not as good as what Asuta and the Ruu clan make, but it’s still pretty popular!” Yumi offered.

“Ah, yes, I would love for you to try my cooking as well!” Myme added.

“Thank you... I can’t eat all that much, but I would be very happy if I could try a bite of each...”

“In that case, Ludo Ruu can eat what’s left. Our okonomiyaki are tasty, right?”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re doing pretty well for someone from town.”

“Whoa, how pompous! Maybe I should add a heaping helping of chitt seeds to your portion...”

And so, before opening their stalls, Yumi and Myme prepared servings for Granny Jiba and Donda Ruu. As I continued frying my giba cutlets, the girls carried their dishes over on plates, along with meat-carving knives so that they could cut the food up into smaller bits that would be easier for Granny Jiba to eat with her weak teeth.

“Ah, this is delicious... Shockingly so, in fact...”

“You’re flattering me. Myme’s cooking is one thing, but our stuff isn’t all that great. We don’t use expensive ingredients, so I know the taste suffers as a result.”

“No, they really are both delicious... Perhaps I’m just so overjoyed that it’s making them taste even better to me, though...”

The people of the forest’s edge never offered mere polite flattery to anyone for how good a dish was. Granny Jiba’s words most certainly reflected her honest feelings.

“Hmm, I’m getting hungry myself, just watching! Girls, I’ll get some money ready, so could you sell me a serving of each?!” Dan Rutim chimed in.

“Granny Jiba’s leftovers weren’t enough for me either. I’ll split with the others, so could you throw on another one of each?” Ludo Ruu said.

“Thanks for your business! It’ll be ready soon, so just hold on a moment.”

Once the cutlets had fried up golden brown, I lifted them up onto a wire rack. While I was waiting for the oil to drip off, Fei Beim suddenly spoke to me. “Um, why exactly are you smiling like that without saying a word? I’m sorry to say, but it’s a bit creepy.”

“Oh, sorry.”

Listening to the lovely conversation the others were having had naturally caused my expression to loosen up. When I stole a glance at her, I found Ai Fa staring downward with a wonderfully calm look on her face as well.

What was Granny Jiba feeling right now? There were so many customers crowded around the giba cooking stalls, with over a hundred people happily eating away in our outdoor restaurant. And not only easterners and southerners, but even the westerners of Genos who had taken such exception to the people of the forest’s edge were now passionately spending coins to purchase our dishes.

When I had first opened the stall, even southerners had turned a cold shoulder our way. They didn’t fear giba, but they’d still seen the people of the forest’s edge as traitors who had cast aside the southern god of Jagar, so the first people to try our giba cooking with no reservations had turned out to be from Sym, since there had never been any bad blood between us.

And now, all sorts of people were enjoying giba cooking. There were still a lot of people in the post town and Daleim lands who feared giba and the people of the forest’s edge, and there were undoubtedly a good number of folks in the castle town who felt outright contempt for us. But folks like that would never come anywhere near this place.

It was possible that we felt so good about our progress because we were only seeing the most positive side of things. But in just half a year, we had managed to fill in the rift between us so much. Fear and habitual avoidance had been fostered over the course of eighty long years, and yet, how much had we softened the relationship between us already? In another year, or ten, or eighty down the road, would we have forged an even better relationship? We were giving our all to see that hope realized.

Granny Jiba moved here to Genos back when she was only five years old or so.

The black forest of the south had been burned down in the fires of war. As they'd had no desire to become soldiers for Jagar, the people of the forest's edge had then abandoned their homeland and their god to move here. Roughly a thousand of their number had survived the journey. When they had arrived en masse here in Genos, undoubtedly with their eyes shining like beasts, rejecting all outside communication, probably wearing pelts that came from the black apes and bearing weapons that weren't made of metal on their hips, how frightened and shocked must the citizens have been?

The order that the lord of Genos at that time had given—for them to live at the forest's edge and hunt only giba—might well have been issued out of fear and a desire to keep them at a distance. Or perhaps he even wanted them to be wiped out entirely by the vicious animals. After all, they had then gone on to lose a full half of their number over the course of just a few years.

However, the people of the forest's edge had lived on. They switched out their black ape pelts for those of giba, purchased steel weapons using tusks and horns, and grew even tougher as they overcame their harsh new circumstances.

Thanks to their efforts, the threat of giba attacks had decreased over time, and instead the people of the forest's edge themselves had come to be feared more. They valued the laws of the forest over those of the town, paid no heed to the people or the goings-on of the outside world, and dedicated themselves solely to hunting their ferocious prey. As they took the might of those beasts into themselves, they grew even stronger, and eventually the townsfolk had started to treat them like living natural disasters instead of the giba.

There were surely countless misunderstandings at work there. Not to mention the simple fact that the two groups were so different from one another.

The people of the forest's edge were so earnest and proud that they had no fear of being misunderstood or isolated. In fact, they themselves likely felt similarly to the townsfolk, that the gulf between them was too wide for them to ever truly connect, and so they kept their distance.

That was the history that Granny Jiba had watched for the past eighty years. So what did she think now, seeing what was happening before her? Someone as young and inexperienced as me couldn't even begin to imagine.

“Hey there! Sorry we’re a little late today,” a girl’s voice suddenly called out with a laugh, derailing my train of thought. I then realized a number of the traveling performers were now standing in front of my stall. The acrobat, Pino; the minstrel, Neeya; the strongman, Doga; and the twins, Arun and Amin.

“Could we get the same amount of food as always today? I’ll leave what you give us up to you.”

“Sure. Thanks for your continued business. I believe you all enjoyed these giba cutlets. We can sell you the giba manju and myamuu giba on other days, so how about we go with some cutlets, soup, and curry?”

“How thoughtful. It’s nice to be able to take it easy and leave it all up to you.”

“All right. I don’t have enough of them ready yet to fill your order, so it’ll be a little while.”

I quickly added some battered sirloin into the boiling oil. In the meantime, Neeya, the incurable philanderer, once again tried making advances on Ai Fa, earning him a chilly glare from Pino.

But then, Pino’s black eyes suddenly shifted to look behind the stall, and she remarked, “Oh? There seem to be quite a few hunters back there as well. And they don’t seem to be the average sort. Is that someone important?”

“Yeah. One of them is a leading clan head of the forest’s edge. He’s also the clan head of everyone from the Ruu working here.”

“A leading clan head...” Pino repeated, her eyes narrowing. “So he’s the father of Jiza Ruu, who I spoke with on the day of dawn? That certainly is something. I’ll have to wake our blockhead of a leader.”

“Huh? What’s this about the troupe leader?”

“You were our guests, and we exposed you to danger. I asked for our apologies to be passed along to the leading clan head that night, but they were brushed aside as being unnecessary,” Pino said as she stepped back. “I’ll leave you in charge here, Doga. I’m going to go get the boss.”

“Ah, hold on! We should probably make sure that the leading clan head will see you first, right?!” I looked over at Ai Fa and she gave me a single nod before

rushing off toward the wagons.

She returned before the cutlets were finished frying and told us, “You have been given permission to meet with him. However, he says your apologies won’t be necessary.”

“Thank you for that. Okay, just hold on a moment.”

With that, Pino took off, and by the time the giba cutlets were ready, she had returned with the leader of their troupe, Gamley.

The other troupe members left, carrying their food, and Donda Ruu walked over to our stalls, accompanied by Ludo Ruu. Meanwhile, Shin Ruu took Ludo Ruu’s place and stood so that he was blocking Granny Jiba from the view of the performers.

“I am extremely delighted that you made time for us during such a busy period. I am Gamley, leader of the Gamley Troupe.”

He had on a red turban and a long red coat, and wore a number of accessories that jangled as he gave an affected bow. His hair was long and curly, and his slender chin had a goat-like beard growing from it. This one-eyed, one-armed man truly was a strange fellow. Also, it seemed it really was true that he wasn’t fond of daylight, as his single eye kept blinking wearily.

“I’m one of the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge and the head of the Ruu, Donda Ruu. You helped my comrades out before, from what I hear.” Donda Ruu stood there dauntingly between the stalls and wagons, looking down at the performers. He must have heard about Gamley’s mysterious skill with flames, because he seemed to have no intention of letting the man come near Granny Jiba. “As I said before, there is no need for apologies. My comrades visited your tent of their own volition, and I also heard that you stepped forward to protect them from those bandits. So what is there to apologize for?”

“It was a huge failure on our part, allowing our valued customers to be threatened with blades. Spectators should be able to enjoy our performances without any worries at all while under that tent, so we feel that we misstepped terribly that night.”

“I see... I can tell that you have a great deal of pride when it comes to your

business. It will serve you well to maintain that attitude as you continue with your work.”

“I am delighted to hear you say that. We also wished to return your entry fees, but will you not accept those either?”

“It’s like my son told you the night before last. There’s no reason for you to return what you’ve been paid.”

“I see. That’s a shame,” Gamley said as he looked up at Donda Ruu. Just like Pino, he didn’t seem to be a bad person, but he certainly was incredibly enigmatic. “But this still doesn’t feel right to us... In that case, how about the next time you visit our tent, you can come in for free?”

“What?”

“Or do you not want your precious comrades going anywhere near such a dangerous place in the future? In that case, I suppose I’ll simply have to keep bowing my head until you accept.”

Though his expression was deadly serious, it looked to me like Gamley had a smile in his eyes. Meanwhile, Pino had remained silent the whole time, with her hands folded in front of her. She had the poise of an adorable doll.

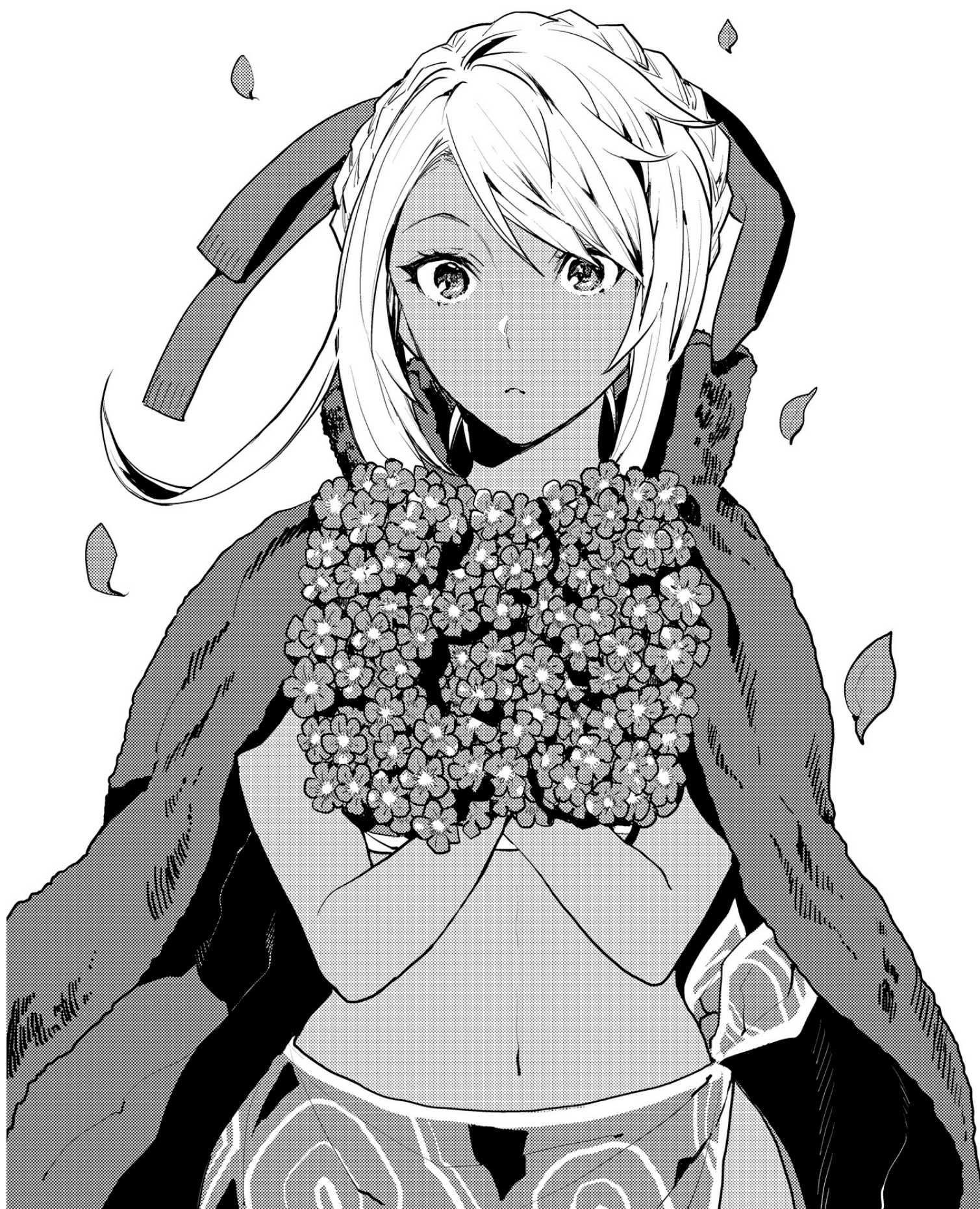
“You certainly are a crafty one...”

“Yes, even a starving beast would surely turn the other way when faced with someone so seedy-looking.”

“It isn’t as if I’ve forbidden my clan members from approaching your people... I simply said not to spend coins wastefully.”

“How splendid. I promise we will show you a performance to equal the payment we have received,” Gamley said, his right arm moving toward Pino. All at once, a number of small red flowers fell from his outstretched hand for Pino to catch. He had surely just set things up so they would fall from the sleeve of his coat, but it looked as if those flowers had come straight out of his palm itself. “That’s enough for fourteen, the number who visited the night before last. If you have these paplua flowers, you can enjoy our performances without paying, so please accept them.”

Donda Ruu shot Ai Fa a look, and she went ahead and accepted the flowers for us. It wasn't a great time to say so out loud, but she really did look lovely in a different way than usual with her arms full of those red blossoms.



“Well then, I believe that is all we needed to speak about,” Donda Ruu remarked, moving to leave.

However, Gamley then called out, “Hold on a moment. There is one more thing I wished to discuss, on an unrelated topic. I have a request I’d like to make of you, as a leading clan head of the forest’s edge.” Donda Ruu silently narrowed his eyes, while Gamley grinned despite his own eye being bleary. “The forest and mountain of Morga have quite a few intriguing beasts hidden within, giba foremost among them, correct? Could we have your permission to capture them?”

“What was that...?”

“As you might have already heard, we gather unusual animals from all over the world and train them to perform. We’ve had our eyes on the beasts of Morga for some time.”

“So you wish to try to train the beasts of Morga to do tricks?” Donda Ruu questioned, a blaze starting to simmer in his blue eyes. “Let me start by saying, no one is permitted to set foot on Mount Morga. That is not our law, but one that comes from Genos. If you pillage that place and incur the anger of the verb wolves, giant madarama snakes, and red savages, Genos itself will be destroyed.”

“Ooh, how frightening.”

“Now that I think about it, from what I’ve been told, for one among your number, it’s difficult to tell if he’s a man or a beast. He couldn’t possibly be...”

“Oh, Zetta is the unfortunate child of a black vamda ape...or at least, that’s our official story. But at any rate, he most certainly isn’t one of the savages of Morga. After all, his fur is pitch black rather than red.”

“I see. So that’s why the soldiers of Genos didn’t take him down,” Donda Ruu grumbled. “At any rate, Mount Morga is firmly off limits. Furthermore, it’s the duty of the people of the forest’s edge to hunt the giba lurking out in the forest. You’re saying you wish to come into our hunting grounds to capture a giba?”

“Yes, as long as that would be permitted,” Gamley replied with an easygoing smile as his eye blazed like an inferno. “Is that forbidden as well? I believe it

shouldn't run afoul of the laws of Genos as long as we don't pillage the fruits of the forest, but is it not permitted for anyone but you people of the forest's edge to hunt giba?"

"There is a law that townsfolk shouldn't set foot in the forest carelessly..."

"I can't say I quite grasp the limits of what would be counted as careless. When we asked the guards around town, they scolded us and said not to attempt anything so absurd."

It was as if his words were a wriggling eel, impossible to pin down. I couldn't help but feel it would have been a good idea to summon Gazraan Rutim as well, but it would have been rude to suggest that to Donda Ruu.

At any rate, with both eyes blazing brightly, but his voice remaining perfectly calm, Donda Ruu replied to Gamley's arrogant statement. "The laws of Genos may not have a specific rule about this idea of yours because nobody has ever been foolhardy enough to try it before now. However, we have our own laws at the forest edge."

"Oh? And what would those laws say about this?"

"Firstly, each clan has their own hunting grounds, and it's forbidden to step into one belonging to another clan. That's because you don't have any way of knowing where they've laid their traps. It's a law that must be followed in order to protect yourself as well."

"Yes, yes."

"Secondly, it's forbidden to finish off a giba using poison. Bringing poisonous plants from outside of Morga to the forest's edge or using poison and making giba meat inedible are both strictly forbidden."

"I see. But apparently, if you use certain poisonous plants from Sym, you can avoid spoiling the meat if you know what you're doing."

"Thirdly, the forest of Morga is part of Genos territory, so you cannot take action there without permission from the lord of the land. As such, it is Duke Marstein Genos who can determine whether or not it would be acceptable for you to capture a giba for the sake of your performances, not us."

“Yes, that’s the most troublesome part. Someone as suspicious as myself would never be granted an audience with a noble, after all,” Gamley casually remarked with a shrug of his slender shoulders. “Well, we do have one blockhead of a minstrel in our group who can come and go from the castle town as he pleases, so I suppose he would be our one sliver of hope.”

Donda Ruu offered no comment.

“Still, assuming we do get the duke’s permission, would we be able to capture a giba without getting in your way?”

“You would need hunters from the forest’s edge accompanying you. And once again, only the lord of Genos can order us to do so,” Donda Ruu replied, his facial expression suddenly shifting into the same kind of daring and beastly grin that he had shown us yesterday. “Without an order from the lord of the land, we won’t be so much as lifting a finger for outsiders. And if any fools were to trample on our hunting grounds without giving proper notice, we would have to judge them in accordance with the laws of the forest’s edge. That’s all I have to say.”

“Understood. You have my deepest gratitude for putting up with this tedious conversation. If fate brings us together again in the future, I hope that you will treat me kindly,” Gamley said with a bow before swiftly doing an about-face.

As she also stepped back, Pino whispered to us, “Sorry about our blockhead of a troupe leader. I’ll keep a close eye on him to make sure he doesn’t inconvenience you all, so I hope that you’ll forgive him.”

With that, she disappeared into the crowd, and Ludo Ruu stretched his arms up to the sky while remarking, “Hmm. What an unusual bunch. They sort of remind me of that Kamyua guy somehow.”

“Hmph, you think so too?” Donda Ruu replied, his beastly grin now gone as he stroked his chin and pondered. “We’ll have to send totos to the Zaza and Sauti when we get back. After all, depending on how things play out, we may end up needing to let that ridiculous group into the forest.”

Could that really happen? Honestly, I couldn’t even begin to fathom whether or not it would be a good thing if it did.

Regardless, there surely wasn't any real chance that we'd be ordered to deal with a hassle like that while the revival festival was going on. Considering that we already had a trip to the castle town ahead of us, it just wouldn't be possible for us to deal with yet another burden.

At any rate, I just focused on the work in front of me as Donda and Ludo Ruu returned to Granny Jiba's side.

4

After that, our stalls sold out of food one by one, freeing up some of the women to show Granny Jiba around the outdoor restaurant.

Of course, she was under heavy guard by a group of six hunters, but partway through, Dora and Tara showed up and began talking with her. As I was still stuck working at my stall, I couldn't hear them very well, but I at least spied Granny Jiba adoringly patting Tara on the head.

Naturally, our flow of customers hadn't slowed down at all, so we once again sold all the meals we had prepared on schedule. Yumi had been optimistic and prepared 120 meals, so she stayed open the longest again. But once we closed up shop, her line more than doubled, so she would surely sell out too. It was now the third day since the revival festival had kicked off, and it almost felt like everything was going *too* smoothly at this point.

As we were busy cleaning up the stalls, Donda Ruu approached us, accompanied by Ludo Ruu and looking even more displeased than when he was dealing with Gamley.

"Asuta of the Fa clan, I have something to discuss with you."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Our elder, Jiba, said she wants to go with you to the Daleim lands next time."

"Ah, do you mean Dora's house?"

"That's right. You're planning to go to that vegetable seller's house again tomorrow night, aren't you? The elder has been saying she wants to come along."

That was certainly a surprise.

“Hmm...” I tilted my head. “His house looked pretty close to capacity with the number of visitors we brought last time. If we add the same number of hunters you have watching over her today, that could prove pretty difficult... What did Dora say?”

“He was the one to bring up the idea in the first place. Or more accurately, his daughter said it and he agreed.”

“Oh. Then I suppose it won’t be any issue.”

“How can you say it isn’t an issue? The elder’s ridiculous whims have been nothing but a giant pain.”

After being taken aback for a second, I let a laugh slip out without thinking.

“What are you laughing about...?”

“S-Sorry. You just looked so troubled that I couldn’t help myself.”

After glaring at me with a threatening, beastly look, Donda Ruu scratched his head. “Hmph. It’s all well and good that she’s got more energy, but if you ask me, she’s got a bit *too* much... She was always an especially stubborn woman, even for the Ruu clan. Despite her small stature, she’s got a fierce spirit, which makes her difficult to handle.”

Despite appearances, Donda Ruu was still only just over forty years old. Granny Jiba was eighty-five, so by the time he’d been born, she would have been in her early forties. She might have still been acting as the clan head of the Ruu at the time.

She would have been about the age Donda Ruu is now, so it’s like the difference between Donda and Kota Ruu... I can’t even imagine it, I thought to myself.

Then Donda Ruu moved closer to me with an even more intimidating look on his face. “What is that house in the Daleim lands like? I’ve heard the elders there shun us people of the forest’s edge, but would it be dangerous at all?”

“At the very least, it certainly wouldn’t be any more dangerous than the post town. Everyone who lives there just grows vegetables, so they don’t carry

weapons... Besides, even as little as you've interacted with him, you should have a pretty good idea of what Dora's like, right?"

Dora had once stood before Donda Ruu and a bunch of other hunters when they had been trying to head to the castle town. It hadn't just been us and the Ruu clan that time. Even the criminals from the Suun and the hunters from the north like Gulaf Zaza and Deek Dom had been there, which had been quite intimidating for the townsfolk. Even so, Dora had stood alone before them and said he wished to keep forming bonds with the people of the forest's edge.

Back then, we'd been in a real touch-and-go situation with Cyclaeus. It was so bad that it had seemed as if the people of the forest's edge would either end up having to destroy Genos or be destroyed by them. How much resolve had Dora needed to work up to stand before us then? Donda Ruu surely understood the answer to that question.

"I will need to talk to everyone who wants to go to the Daleim lands when we make it back to the settlement... Let the others know too."

"Right. Got it."

With a sour look on his face, Donda Ruu returned to the wagon.

Ai Fa had been listening to the conversation beside me, and she now brought her face close to mine and commented, "Rather than acting as clan head, Donda Ruu seems to be letting the part of him that's still her grandson show."

"Yeah, I'm kind of surprised too."

"This is good for both Granny Jiba and Donda Ruu, though. While he always has to be strict due to his position, it wouldn't do for a clan head to forget his feelings toward his family," Ai Fa said, suddenly breaking out into a smile. "And there's no reason to worry about Granny Jiba. I'll be by her side the whole time, so she won't be in any danger."

"Right, since you'll be sharing a bedroom with her. Plus Ludo Ruu and the others will be coming along again, so I'm not concerned at all."

The only real worry was Granny Jiba's health, but that was a matter for her and her family to keep an eye on. Personally, I found the thought of her having a chance to interact with the members of Dora's household quite heartening.

As that thought was passing through my mind, Lala Ruu was the next one to approach us.

“Hey Asuta, I’ve got something I’d like to discuss...”

“Hmm? Well, it looks like we’re all done cleaning up, so why don’t we talk as we move?”

Once again, there were four hunters sticking close to Ruuruu’s wagon. After checking one last time to make sure we hadn’t forgotten anything, we started heading down the road.

“So, what is it you wanted to talk about?”

“Well...” Lala Ruu said, her gaze momentarily drifting down to her feet before she looked up at me resolutely. She brought her fingers together in front of her chest as we walked along the stone path. “Asuta, I have a request! Please bring me along when you go to the castle town this time!”

“Huh? The castle town...? Do you mean for the day when we’ll be unveiling our cooking to the guests from Banarm?”

“Right. It’s also the day Shin Ruu was invited to go, isn’t it? So I want to come along.”

It really was only natural for her to feel that way. After all, Shin Ruu would be going up against one of the most skilled swordsmen in the castle town.

“Hmm, well...I suppose hunters from the forest’s edge don’t really train in the kind of swordsmanship that you’d use against other people, so I can understand why you’re worried.”

“Huh? What are you talking about? There’s no way Shin Ruu would ever lose to some noble!”

“Huh? But...”

“Forget the sword competition! It’s more, well, Shin Ruu... I mean, those noble ladies fell for him and invited him to the castle town, right?” Lala Ruu angrily asked, her face instantly going bright red.

Shin Ruu was on guard duty at the back of the group, so there was no chance of him overhearing our conversation.

“Ugh, jeez, what the heck?! First Yumi’s friend, and then that little performer girl! Why does everyone have their eyes on Shin Ruu?”

“I don’t think Pino really has any special feelings for Shin Ruu, though. They probably don’t even know each other’s names.”

“But that girl from the stall was making eyes at Shin Ruu, and some noble lady summoned him by name, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, I can’t really deny those. But I don’t think they’re seriously considering marriage.”

“Even so, I can’t stand it!” Lala Ruu shouted so loudly that she startled Toor Deen, who was pushing a cart beside us.

I took a moment to process. If I were in Lala Ruu’s position...say, if some noble from the castle town casually hit on Ai Fa, I’d definitely be incredibly worried. There was no way I’d be able to stand the thought of sending her off to the castle town alone like that.

“Right, I understand... I’ll try to come up with a plan so that you can come along.”

“You mean it?” Lala Ruu said, her eyes opening wide in surprise. “But I’m not as useful as Toor Deen or Rimee. And the Fa clan accepted this job, not the Ruu...”

“Yeah, but I’m going to have Reina and Sheera Ruu accompany me anyway. I really want them to taste Varkas’s cooking.” We had only just started making arrangements for the trip, but naturally, I was already planning on having them come along. “I mean, they’ve come up with a wonderful dish using white mamaria wine. They’re still saying they don’t think they’ve perfected it yet, but the castle town doesn’t customarily use wine in cooking, so I’m sure they’ll find it really surprising.”

“But...in that case, they’ll want to ask someone more skilled like Rimee or Ama Min Rutim to assist them, right?”

“Not necessarily. Since we’re going to have a lot of business preparations to do as well, they’ll likely choose to prepare the dish at home and heat it up in the castle town. You know, like they did with the herb-grilled dish in the Daleim

lands.”

“But then they wouldn’t need my help for anything, right?”

“Well, from that perspective, there won’t be a need for both Reina and Sheera Ruu to come either. But I’m certain they’ll both want to come along, so you should be able to accompany us too.”

Lala Ruu went silent, and it was easy to see on her face that she was conflicted. She must have been worried about whether it would be all right to skip out on work around the house just because she wanted to. Reina and Sheera Ruu were passionate enough about improving their cooking that they tended not to let that kind of thing stand in their way.

“So, you don’t feel right taking advantage?” I asked.

“Yeah...”

“Then what if the Fa clan asked for your assistance? You should be just as skilled as Yun Sudra, at least. So you could help out with my cooking alongside her and Toor Deen.”

“You’d really be okay with that?”

“Yeah. I’m preparing more dishes than Reina and Sheera Ruu are, so I was planning to ask for a number of assistants to begin with. The Fou and Ran folks are busy with work around their houses, so if I couldn’t get anyone but Toor Deen and Yun Sudra to help out, I had been planning on asking Yamiru Lea to come along.”

Lala Ruu looked down again, then met my gaze with upturned eyes and quietly said, “Thanks. I’ll work hard so that you don’t end up wishing you had picked Yamiru Lea instead.”

“Good. Okay, I’ll be counting on you, then.”

Lala Ruu gave a quick bow and took off running back toward the wagon where Granny Jiba was waiting.

Ai Fa had been listening to the exchange beside me the whole time, and now she nodded to me with a serious look on her face. “Hmm. This seems like a fairly difficult situation. Just what are those noble ladies thinking?”

“I couldn’t say. I’d like to think they aren’t quite as passionate as Leeheim was when he set his eyes on Reina Ruu, though.”

“Hmm... I can never understand how nobles think in the first place, but I especially can’t imagine a noble would ever wish to marry a person of the forest’s edge.”

“That’s true. Well, it’s possible that he just whimsically wanted to share a meal with a girl he found himself attracted to, or something.”

“But would one change their attitude so greatly after being rejected if their feelings were mere whimsy? That noble kept taking issue with your cooking during the last dinner party like he was a different person entirely.”

“Well, since matters of love were involved, I could see his pride as a noble being hurt.”

Ai Fa was being really persistent, so we had ended up on a fairly delicate topic, and now she was moving closer to me, looking like she couldn’t accept my explanation.

“I don’t understand what you mean when you talk about his love. Are you saying that noble really did wish to take Reina Ruu as his bride?”

“No, not as a bride, but maybe something along similar lines... This may be an alien idea for a person of the forest’s edge, but the townsfolk probably have some concept of free love. It was the same way back in my homeland too.”

“Free love...” Ai Fa repeated, looking even more bewildered.

“Er...” As I pushed my stall down the crowded street, I chose my words carefully. “In town, they have a concept of taking a lover who isn’t a spouse.”

“A lover...”

“I guess you could call it something like a trial period to determine whether or not you should get married. It’s a chance to determine whether or not you like one another, so you can find a good match.”

“But a noble would never take a woman of the forest’s edge as a bride. So there would be no point in testing such feelings.”

“Yes, that’s true, but still... Some people just want to enjoy having a lover

without getting married. I think Yumi's friend, Luia, might be that kind of person."

"Acting like husband and wife, without any intention of getting married?"

Ai Fa's eyelids were now half lowered. It seemed the straightforward people of the forest's edge just couldn't accept such a concept.

"Oh, but I don't really know how Luia or those noble ladies actually feel, you know. I was just applying the trends from my home country to them..."

"So, such actions were permitted in your homeland?"

"Yes." I had to reply honestly. After all, lying was a crime at the forest's edge.

As a result, Ai Fa's eyes narrowed even more, and the shine in them grew positively piercing. And yet, she wasn't saying a word.

"Well, different countries each have their own customs. I think the people of the forest's edge should stick to the path that they feel is right."

Still no response.

"Er, clan head?"

"What about you?" she asked in a terribly calm voice. But even though her voice was calm, I could sense a storm raging in her tone. "Did you enjoy love with people you didn't intend to marry before coming to the forest's edge, Asuta?"

This time, my honest reply was, "No. For better or worse, I never ran across anyone like that in my home country. I was so busy with my work at home that I didn't have much of a chance to get close to any girls my age."

The only one I was ever close to was my childhood friend, Reina, and we were practically raised like siblings. The feelings we shared had nothing to do with romance.

At any rate, my clan head was still remaining silent.

"Are you satisfied now, Ai Fa?"

"You're a person of the forest's edge now... Never forget that, Asuta."

"Of course I won't. You really think I could forget something so important?"

“Very well, then...” Ai Fa stated, furrowing her brow and looking a bit pained. “I promise to stand by you resolutely as your clan head if the time comes when you wish to take someone as a bride. However, I absolutely reject that foolish idea of ‘free love.’”

“Right. I’ve got no intention of importing that particular idea to the forest’s edge.”

Besides, I had no desire to discard my feelings for Ai Fa. Regardless of what she herself might have been prepared to do, that was an unshakable fact.

But I’m sure she still feels the need to work up the resolve to accept whoever I might choose...as the head of the Fa clan.

Ai Fa would definitely get all flustered if I were to tell her I didn’t feel like marrying anyone except her. But then she would feel like she was holding me back, making it so that her clan member couldn’t get married. It would be shameful for her as a clan head.

However, she hadn’t told me to cast her aside and find some other woman to marry yet. The only thing she had said, with equal amounts of joy and sorrow, was that the world just wasn’t fair.

That feeling alone is enough for me, Ai Fa.

Those were my thoughts as I continued to stare in Ai Fa’s direction. In response, my clan head’s cheeks went a bit red, and after I received a sharp elbow to my side, I decided to focus on walking.

And so, Granny Jiba managed to safely complete her trip to the post town, and it had been decided that she would visit the Daleim lands the following day.

Chapter 2: The Day of the Sun's Peak

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It was now the twenty-fifth of the violet month, the day before the day of the sun's peak, and just like with the day of dawn, we were swamped with prep work. At least we had our experience from last time to draw upon, which made the planning phase much less of a mental strain. Once all the tasks we needed to complete were divvied up, I just had to trust that the hardworking people of the forest's edge would get it all done. And my expectations were fully met, with everyone taking care of their assignments in near silence. As a result, we were able to head to the Daleim lands a whole hour earlier than last time.

We had even more people who would be staying over than before, since Jiba Ruu would be joining us, along with three hunters to guard her. Yumi would also be joining us from the post town.

I was worried that our numbers would be enough to push Dora's house past capacity, but he and Tara were the ones who had invited Granny Jiba to begin with. Dora had told us with a smile that he would make the dining and guest rooms work out.

Since the number of participants from the forest's edge had increased to twelve, we had been forced to add another wagon to the equation. And as for the specific chefs we were bringing, Reina Ruu had been swapped in to replace Toor Deen, but the rest of our lineup remained the same. Yun Sudra had also managed to persuade her clan head to let her join us, but since Granny Jiba would be attending this time, she had yielded her spot to the members of the Ruu clan.

And so, the group heading to Dora's house in the Daleim lands consisted of Rimee Ruu, Lala Ruu, Reina Ruu, Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, Shin Ruu, Dan Rutim, and me, plus Granny Jiba and the additional guards protecting her, Jiza Ruu, Gazraan Rutim, and Giran Ririn.

Though the number of guards had been reduced by half from when we were in the post town, I could still sense Donda Ruu's ardor to protect his grandmother in how he had included his eldest son, Jiza Ruu, in the list. Or perhaps it was simply that he wanted Jiza Ruu to experience more of the world, as the young man would one day succeed him as leading clan head. I suspected that the intent behind including Gazraan Rutim, who had always been an innovative thinker, and Giran Ririn, with his recently expanded interest in the outside world, was something along those lines as well.

"The town of Genos is surprisingly interesting. I'm really looking forward to tonight and tomorrow morning," Giran Ririn remarked with a smile before getting into the wagon at the Ruu settlement. Until just recently, he apparently hadn't visited the post town at any point in the past half-year, but these last few trips with us seemed to have given him something of a taste for it. In particular, the performances of the Gamley Troupe had really stoked his curiosity.

Once we were ready, we headed straight for the Daleim lands. Since we were visiting earlier in the day this time around, dusk hadn't fallen yet. The sun was gently setting over the vast, idyllic fields of the Daleim lands.

I could still spy people working out there in the fields. One of them must have been Dora, since his shop would have closed for the day a while ago. Apparently, there would be no time to rest until the day before the day of the downfall finished out the year, at which point they would have harvested all the vegetables they could and the people of the Daleim lands would finally be able to take a break.

It would be important to make arrangements in advance for purchasing any vegetables we'd need during that period. Supposedly, things would quiet down a good bit after the festival finally wrapped up around halfway through the silver month, so that was when we would finally be able to catch our breath. Until then, though, we would be toiling like workhorses.

Because of our early arrival, the men weren't present when we arrived at Dora's house. Instead we were greeted by Tara, Yumi, and three women.

"We've been waiting for you, Asuta! I'm looking forward to joining in on your

lessons later!” Yumi greeted us energetically, ignoring the residents of the house. Something was different about her today. Her normal attire was a skirt and a top that only covered the upper part of her chest, but now she was wearing an outfit that ran all the way down her body, and she had her long hair tied up in a ponytail. “Oh, my clothes? Since I’m visiting someone at their house, I figured I should dress a bit more modestly.”

The women of the forest’s edge also used semitransparent veils and shawls to partially conceal their skin when going into town. Yumi had probably changed her clothes for a similar reason. I had never really thought about it, but now I wondered if the way she usually showed so much skin was like some sort of punk fashion.

“We’re getting things ready now. Please, come in.”

The wives of Dora and his eldest son greeted us with smiles, just the same as last time. Also the same as last time was the way Dora’s mother regarded us with a displeased look on her face. Meanwhile, Granny Jiba had emerged from our wagon, supported by Reina and Ludo Ruu.

“I’m sorry for imposing upon you today. I’m just some old bag of bones from the Ruu clan who goes by the name Jiba Ruu...”

“My, thank you for coming all this way. Please feel free to rest for a while in one of our rooms until dinner.”

“No... If you do not mind, I would like to spend as much time talking with you as I can...” Granny Jiba replied, but the two wives would be holed up in the kitchen with us. That just left Dora’s mother, who hadn’t opened her heart to the people of the forest’s edge yet, and Tara.

At least the younger of the two was enthusiastic about the idea. Tara nodded and said, “Yeah! You can talk to us, Granny Jiba! Do you have to work, Rimee Ruu?”

“No, I don’t, since we’ve got Reina here today! Right...?” Rimee Ruu asked, and received a kind smile from her older sister.

“Lala’s here too, so we’ll be fine. You don’t mind, do you Jiza?”

“Hmm.” Jiza Ruu nodded with the intense expression of a hunter on his face

as he glanced over our surroundings. “In that case, Ludo and I...and the two from the Rutim will remain in the same room.”

The plan was likely that there should always be three hunters with Granny Jiba and one for each of the other women. Even here in Daleim, where it was highly unlikely any outlaws would try anything, Jiza Ruu still wasn't letting his guard down in the least.

“All right, we'll be borrowing your stove now.”

The remaining members of our group walked across the main hall and headed to the kitchen. The reason we had come early was so we could teach the women of Dora's house how to make condiments. We three chefs entered the kitchen with Ai Fa, while Shin Ruu stood outside the entrance and Giran Ririn kept watch around the house.

The two wives of the household and Yumi would be the ones getting taught. While Yumi could already produce a fair number of condiments, she still wanted to participate in order to reinforce what she had already learned, and hopefully pick up something new as well.

“Let's start with the preparations for Worcestershire sauce and ketchup, since those take more time to make. Do we have aria, tarapa, and myamuu on hand?”

“Yes. These tarapa aren't the prettiest, but they shouldn't taste any different.”

The plan was that we would be using ingredients from Dora's household where possible, and I would provide anything extra that was needed. This way, they wouldn't be wasting their money if nothing turned out to be to their taste. It would also let us show our gratitude to them for inviting us over.

“Please start by mincing the aria and myamuu as finely as possible. Then cut up the tarapa coarsely and boil them.”

With each condiment, I used all sorts of ingredients to create the desired flavor, but considering I didn't exactly have a notepad on hand, it was difficult to convey every detail with precision. As such, I had made an effort to simplify the recipes as much as I could manage.

“All right, now put some of the aria and tarapa in this small pot and the rest in that one, along with the myamuu, and let them both simmer. The one with the myamuu will become the ketchup, so give it more of the tarapa. For the ketchup, you’ll want to add salt, sugar, pico leaves, and chitt seeds. For those last two, you can take them from the stuff that we brought with us.”

Pico leaves cost money in town, and apparently Dora’s family didn’t buy them often, so we had brought some from the Fa house.

“Ooh, so those are chitt seeds? They smell like they’re really spicy.”

“Yeah, they definitely are, so you just want to use a pinch. They cost one red coin for twenty of them.”

A twenty-centimeter-long stalk of myamuu cost the same amount, so chitt seeds weren’t really all that expensive. Dora’s family would easily be able to purchase some for themselves.

“Then just let it simmer for a while. Don’t put a lid over it; we want the moisture to boil off. In the meantime, I’ll show you how to make mayonnaise.”

You didn’t need a stove to prepare this one. It just involved stirring kimyuus egg yolk and white mamaria vinegar together with salt and pico leaves, then adding some reten oil bit by bit.

Since white mamaria vinegar from Banarm was a bit pricey, I had tried making it with red mamaria vinegar instead, but since the red variety had more of a balsamic sort of flavor, I felt like it wouldn’t quite pair right with okonomiyaki or cutlets, though it would probably be good in salads and the like.

“My, even without cooking it over a flame, it’s still thickening and turning sticky.”

“Right. As soon as it gets thick enough, it’s done. Why don’t you give it a try?”

I chopped up the leftover aria and tino in order to prepare an improvised vegetable salad. After adding a bit of mayonnaise, I had everyone take a bite, at which point I heard someone remark in surprise, “My, even though raw tino is generally lacking in flavor, this is quite delicious.”

“Yeah. I find that fresh vegetables complement meat dishes rather well. But

when I'm just eating raw vegetables, I usually have them with a light dressing instead."

Considering the occasion, I decided to have them try that too. By blending tau oil, mamaria vinegar, and reten oil, then adding salt and pico leaves for taste, I could put together a pretty decent dressing. I added the reten oil bit by bit while stirring until it emulsified, which would be easy to remember, as it was the same process as with the mayonnaise.

If you added sugar or myamuu, you could create wildly different flavors to enjoy. Since Dora's family adored vegetables so much, I figured that showing them techniques to make raw vegetables even tastier would make them really happy.

"Now then, how about I show you an interesting way to use mayonnaise?" I said. I boiled a kimyuus egg, then added finely chopped aria and mayonnaise in order to make a tartar sauce. "This goes well with meat dishes and should be tasty if you spread it on baked poitan as well."

Yumi was greatly pleased by this one. "Hey, doesn't it seem like adding a thin slice of giba meat on top of baked poitan and spreading this on top would make a nice little meal?"

"Yeah, that does sound pretty good. And you wouldn't have to spend much on ingredients if you used only a single slice of meat."

"Uh-huh! That would be a great dish to sell at our place! After all, we sometimes have people come in who are so poor they can't even afford our okonomiyaki."

"It's a wonderful way to use kimyuus eggs as well, isn't it?" Dora's wife remarked, sounding impressed.

Then, his son's wife leaned forward from beside her. "The only ways to use kimyuus eggs that I've heard about before this were cooking them to use in place of meat or boiling them in a pot. It feels kind of extravagant, using them to enhance other dishes."

"Yeah, I've heard something like that from a couple of the innkeepers I know. Still, as an ingredient in mayonnaise and tartar sauce, it's not half bad, right?" I

said.

“I certainly can’t think of anything to complain about. In fact, it’s making me want to raise more kimyuus so we can get some extra eggs.”

The two wives looked even happier than usual, and I was so relieved that this condiment lesson didn’t end up just being a waste of their time.

After that, I prepared a tau oil-based sauce for grilled meats, which concluded the first half of the proceedings.

“All right, how about we work on dinner until the pots are done simmering over there? You’ll be making okonomiyaki, right, Yumi?”

“Yeah! It’ll be my gift to everyone here!”

Since there were already two pots on the stove, I used some charcoal to light the braziers I had brought along myself. Reina Ruu and the others heated up the white mamaria wine stew they had prepared on one of them, while I placed a steel plate on top of another and entrusted it to Yumi. Then I placed a wire mesh over the last one so I could grill some meat directly.

Hopefully, they wouldn’t think of this as me cutting corners, but the only thing I had prepared for today was giba meat seasoned with salt and pico leaves. The reason was that I wanted them to try it with the condiments we had prepared today. I had brought a variety of cuts, such as sirloin, tenderloin, thigh meat, and the spare ribs that Dan Rutim had unsurprisingly requested.

As we worked, it steadily grew darker outside the window. The ketchup and Worcestershire sauce finished simmering when we were about eighty percent done with our cooking, and Dora and the other men finally returned home.

“What a delicious smell! I’m glad I got good and hungry before coming home!” Dora called out from the entrance, and I could also hear Dan Rutim giving a hearty chuckle. There were some clattering sounds too, which must have been additional chairs being brought in. “Hey, Asuta, I’m sorry, but could you make enough for one more?”

“Hey, Dora. Sounds like you were working hard out there. I planned on making extra to begin with, so it shouldn’t be any issue, but who exactly will be joining us?”

“Well, I happened to be talking to Granny Mishil, asking her to bring over some chatchi and gigo, and I ended up inviting her to come over.”

Granny Mishil was a woman who sold us vegetables that Dora’s shop didn’t have. We had known her for quite some time. Naturally, I didn’t have any objections.

“We’ll be ready soon, so please hold on for just a moment... Lala Ruu, how are the pots looking?”

“They’ve both boiled down to just about half their original volume. I’ll grill the rest of the meat, so why don’t you finish things up over there, Asuta?” Lala Ruu said, then with a deadly serious look in her eyes she added, “I swear I won’t burn it.” She must have been steeling herself for the upcoming trip to the castle town. Feeling grateful to her and acknowledging her enthusiasm, I set about finalizing the ketchup and Worcestershire sauce.

“For the ketchup, we’ll finish it up by adding mamaria vinegar and boiling it until it’s back to this volume. If the taste feels lacking, you can adjust it with salt and pico leaves.”

“I see. It looks like that tarapa should be wonderfully viscous and delicious now. Also, it smells the same as that Napolitan dish you made before.”

“For the Worcestershire sauce, now we add tau oil and mamaria vinegar. You only need half as much vinegar as tau oil for this one. This sauce has a strong flavor, so fine-tuning it is tricky, but there shouldn’t be much need to.”

“Hmm. It certainly has a powerful aroma. It’s even making me feel a touch dizzy.”

“Yeah. But once it’s cooled down, that scent should ease up too.”

With both of those sauces finished, I put aside enough of each for the night’s dinner, then sealed the rest in containers. Filtering it would make it feel smoother on the tongue, but the type of cloth needed for that would be fairly expensive, so I omitted that step this time.

“Okay, let’s carry the food out. And please make sure to give the condiments a try during dinner.”

With that, we all got to work carrying the dishes out to the two large tables in the main hall, which now had a number of extra chairs set up in the space between them. Around one of the tables sat the people who had remained in the hall earlier, plus Granny Mishil, while the men who had been working the fields sat around the other. The members of Dora's household and the people of the forest's edge were mostly sitting separately from each other.

Though I hesitated to choose, I ended up sitting at the table with Granny Jiba. Ai Fa automatically took the seat next to me, and then the two wives of the household joined us to fill the rest of the seats.

It was an unusual experience, being seated at the same table as Jiza Ruu. Still, he had a peaceful expression on his face, and nothing seemed out of place with him.

Reina Ruu and Yumi, meanwhile, sat at Dora's table, bringing the total number of people currently seated around the room up to twenty-one. For those of us seated in the chairs between the tables like Ai Fa and myself, it felt like our backs would bump up against the folks from the other table. The hall was filled with heat from the people and dishes present.

"Thanks for your hard work, everyone. And Mishil, it's been a while," I said with a smile, but only got an unfriendly grunt back. Despite that, nowadays Granny Mishil always gave our orders top priority, just like Dora did. That meant she was someone I owed a great debt to.

She looked to be a bit older than Dora's mother, around seventy or so. She was a short and rather slender old woman, but she seemed just as hale and hearty as always. As stubborn as always too. She had treated the people of the forest's edge pretty harshly in the beginning, but as someone who had been raised never knowing his own grandmother, I was secretly quite fond of her.

With Granny Mishil and Granny Jiba present, alongside Dora's mother, the average age at this table had to be pretty high. Even after counting the youngest members of the group, Rimee Ruu and Tara, the number would still be way up there.

"Anyway, let's dig in before all this food gets cold! Good work today, everyone!" Dora energetically called out, and the people of the forest's edge

began their premeal chant.

Spread out across the two tables, we had an even more elaborate meal than last time. We had prepared charcoal-grilled giba, fresh salad, and the various condiments. The Ruu clan had made their stew that used white mamaria wine, Yumi had her okonomiyaki, and Dora's family had also made soup and some side dishes. With this much food, we had a real feast on our hands.

"Wow. It's like a mountain of raw vegetables. What should we put on it?"

"I don't think there are any wrong choices here, but my recommendation would be to go for the dressing in that small bottle or the mayonnaise on that wooden plate first. The sauce and ketchup wouldn't be bad either, though, so please feel free to try all of them and see how they compare to one another," I said.

The raw vegetable salad contained not only tino, but also shredded aria and nenon. It was a dish that had become a standard fixture at the Fa house.

"This sauce here should pair best with the grilled meat. But I like the Worcestershire sauce too, myself."

"Oh, for the okonomiyaki you should go with Worcestershire sauce and mayonnaise! But ketchup isn't half bad either!" Yumi chimed in.

"The okonomiyaki is this poitan with tino and meat, isn't it? Mmm. We've only ever cooked our poitan with aria."

"Dora, this is giba rib meat! Even you old folks should learn how delicious giba meat is!" Dan Rutim called out.

As one might expect from having twenty-one people present, it really was incredibly noisy. And so, after giving the bare minimum explanation necessary, I just went ahead and enjoyed the dishes.

At the same time, I stole a glance over in Granny Jiba's direction, and found Rimee Ruu smiling as she cut up the meat and vegetables in the stew. I had offered in advance to prepare some hamburger steak, but the elder had declined, saying, "I want to eat the same thing as everyone else."

Well, Granny Jiba was able to eat Yumi's okonomiyaki without needing it to

be softened up by soaking it in something, so she would surely be able to handle everything aside from the grilled meat and salad I had prepared. And considering the occasion, I hoped she would fill her stomach with as much of the food prepared by Dora's wives as possible.

Dora's family had prepared a soup using karon milk; a sauté of kimyuus meat, aria, and nenon in milk fat; finely diced boiled vegetables; and the tino cores pickled in salt that they had served last time around.

The boiled vegetables were the most novel of those to me. The dish used finely cut aria, tino, and nenon, which were then boiled until soft. Then they were coated in a sauce made from dried kiki, which reminded me of umeboshi.

"We added just a tiny bit of tau oil to that one. It didn't seem to make much of a difference, though."

"No, I would say it helped to draw out the flavor a bit. It's very delicious."

Dried kiki sauce on its own would be too sour, but just adding water would dull the flavor. Their dish had the perfect balance of tau oil to water, and it was even tastier after eating the strongly fatty giba meat.

The karon milk soup also used a ton of vegetables, with just a bit of karon leg meat to accompany it. Despite the fact that they only got a minimal amount of broth from those ingredients, and even though the only seasonings they used were salt and sugar, I didn't see any real glaring issues with the dish. If this was the average level for home cooking, Milano and Telia Mas really must have struggled to provide food worth selling at their inn with their skill level.

"Are you not going to eat any giba meat?" I heard Granny Mishil ask over the noise of the crowd.

Dora's mother was seated next to her. Granny Mishil was probably around ten years her senior, but the two of them seemed kind of similar to each other.

"You certainly seem to be gulping it down without a care in the world."

"Of course I am. Giba meat goes for even more than kimyuus and karon nowadays, so it would be a waste not to eat it," Granny Mishil replied as she coated some skewered giba sirloin with ketchup, then bit into it with some effort. "Well, it's not like I don't understand where you're coming from. Back at

the start, I wondered if the stuff was even edible.”

“But now you look like you’re really enjoying it...”

“That’s because I learned how tasty it was, thanks to that granddaughter of yours,” Granny Mishil stated bluntly, at which point Tara turned their way with a smile from over in her seat beside Rimee Ruu.

“Yeah, you looked really scared to try it at first, Granny Mishil! But you were happy when you found out your veggies were being used to make something so good, right?”

Granny Mishil snorted, “Hmph,” but she didn’t say anything to refute that fact. However, she did shoot a glare at me instead.

“You know, you don’t need to trouble yourself over old folks like us.”

“Huh? Why do you say that?”

“We’ve lived for decades fearing and hating giba and you people of the forest’s edge. So there’s no need for you to act all respectful toward us.”

“Hey, what are you going on about now, Granny Mishil?” Dora interjected from the neighboring table.

Granny Mishil took a slurp of white mamaria wine stew, then continued, “Just leave us be and we’ll kick the bucket before long. In another ten or twenty years, all of our souls will have been summoned to the western god’s side. In my case, it’d be a real feat to make it another five years. So what do you care if old-timers like us hate you?”

“I don’t agree,” I replied, sitting up straight as Granny Mishil frowned at me in displeasure.

“Well, you should. If all the old-timers who hate you people of the forest’s edge die off, then nobody will stand in your way, right? As long as everything’s as you’ve been saying and nobody else causes any trouble, no more folks will come to hate or fear you. What more could you want?”

“What I want is for the citizens of Genos and the people of the forest’s edge to be good neighbors.”

I wasn’t a leading clan head or anything, so it was presumptuous of me to say

so. But still, she was staring intently right at me, so I had to offer my personal response as Asuta of the Fa clan to Granny Mishil, a vegetable seller from the Daleim lands.

“I’m sure this won’t sound very convincing coming from someone as young as me, but...the way I see it, the future is made by adding up everything in the present. I don’t believe you can just ignore the present we’re living in now while hoping for a bright future and expect it to actually come.”

“You sure know how to pompously run your mouth...”

“Sorry. But that’s how I truly feel... And I can’t say where I’ll be in ten or twenty years, myself.”

“That’s right! We hunters don’t know when we may perish out in the forest, so we can never take tomorrow for granted,” Dan Rutim heartily declared while holding up a container of fruit wine. “Besides, it’s not even all that much trouble when you’re right here in front of us now! No matter how much we may wish for it, we can’t form bonds with people who haven’t been born yet! Whatever happens a decade or two from now, we’ll just have to let our children and grandchildren take care of it!”

“You’re so loud. It hurts my ears.”

“Sorry about that! If you dislike me because of it, though, then that’s my fault alone! I don’t mind if you do, but don’t go hating all of us people of the forest’s edge, all right?” Dan Rutim said with a hearty chuckle, leaning forward over the table. “But without actually exchanging words like this, you can’t truly come to like or hate me, right? And it’s the same with giba meat! If it’s tasty, you can eat it, and if it’s bad, you can avoid it. But I don’t see how it can be proper to say you won’t ever eat something without even giving it a try first. And I believe people should try their hardest to follow the proper path through life!”

It was a fitting way of putting things for Dan Rutim, and it also aligned surprisingly well with my own feelings. At any rate, I just wanted everyone to have a good understanding of what sort of folks the people of the forest’s edge really were. If we reached that point and the townsfolk still feared or hated them, well, there was nothing I could do about that. I mean, if neither side was able to see eye to eye, there was no way anyone could just force things to work

out. But I was always thinking about how to get the townsfolk to know the people of the forest's edge better and vice versa, so that we could eventually arrive at the most accurate conclusion possible.

"I also once thought I didn't care what happened to me..." Granny Jiba now quietly joined in. "I felt it was my children, grandchildren, and so on who would determine the future of the forest's edge, and regardless of how much I thought about things, it would never have any impact... But a precious friend of mine made me realize that even an old bag of bones like myself is still one of the many people living in this world right now..."

Without even thinking, I glanced over at Ai Fa. If my memory wasn't mistaken, she had told Granny Jiba something to that effect several months back.

My clan head was pursing her lips and staring straight at Granny Jiba's face.

"I couldn't stand the fact that I was living here in this land... I felt that our home was the black forest, and when it was destroyed, we should have gone along with it... To be even more blunt, I hated the lord of Genos for forcing this harsh lifestyle on our people..."

Not a single person present said a word.

With a terribly clear gaze, Granny Jiba looked out over everyone and smiled.

"Still, the lord and people of Genos must have hated us too, as we were nothing but a problem foisted upon them... Letting that hatred drag on for eighty long years... Well, do you really think it's acceptable to push that onto our children and grandchildren?"

Her words were met with no response.

"Of course, all I can do is watch over those children and grandchildren of mine as they strive their hardest... Still, I too want to try just as hard as they are as I watch over them, until the moment my soul returns to the forest..."

"Hmph. Well, you can certainly gab about it for long enough," Granny Mishil cut in. Her eyes had narrowed quite a bit, but then they turned toward Tara and Rimee Ruu, who were huddled together. "These little girls are so close they're practically sisters...so I suppose we're not that different in terms of wanting something more."

Granny Jiba smiled silently.

Meanwhile, at the neighboring table, Dora's mother and uncle were unsurprisingly glaring at the giba dishes in front of them.

"Well, just go ahead and live as you please. That's what I'll be doing." With that, Granny Mishil bit into Yumi's okonomiyaki. Though she spoke abusively, she was eating nothing but giba dishes, and she always tried to make it as convenient as possible for us to do business with her. That was the path that she had chosen of her own volition.

Ultimately, Dora's mother and uncle gave our giba dishes little more than the odd nibble here and there, but I wasn't particularly upset about that. I just felt that next time I came to Dora's house, I wanted to prepare dishes that they would enjoy a whole lot more.

2

The following day, the twenty-sixth of the violet month, was the second holiday during the revival festival, the day of the sun's peak.

Just like last time, we headed from Dora's house to the post town first thing in the morning, where we set about preparing our whole roast giba. Depending on how Granny Jiba was feeling, we had been prepared to take her home at this point, but she didn't seem worn out in the least, so now we had her watching us as we worked.

Naturally, the number of hunters we had acting as guards had increased. It had been decided in advance with Donda Ruu that if Granny Jiba didn't return by this time, he would promptly send additional hunters to town.

The only chefs to come later were Sheera Ruu and Toor Deen. As for the hunters, six elites in total arrived to join us, including Darmu Ruu and Rau Lea, also bringing along a couple observers, Sufira Zaza and Mia Lea Ruu.

"It's practically empty back at the main house now. I feel bad for Vina and the others, but I wanted to see how things were in the post town," Mia Lea Ruu told me.

Now that I thought about it, though Mia Lea Ruu was in charge of the women

in the Ruu clan, she hardly ever came to town for shopping. I actually suspected that this was the first time I had ever seen her here. Whether that was true or not, though, she looked really happy as she exited the wagon.

“Well then, I will be attending to the elder for now, but feel free to call for me at any time if you need an extra hand.”

“Right, thank you,” I said. However, six chefs was already more than enough for us to work with at this stage.

We quickly split into teams of two to set about preparing our whole roast giba at three separate stalls. Unfortunately, today we only had one proper whole roast to offer. Young giba were well protected by their mothers, so the hunters didn’t catch them all that often. As such, two of the stalls were instead preparing a dressed carcass that had been split in half.

We had removed the head and internal organs of a full-grown beast and divided the remainder into two parts with about thirty kilograms of meat each. I figured the giba must have been seventy to eighty kilos to begin with. Before long, the number of passersby on the road started to rise, and soon we were hearing even more sounds of wonder and admiration than last time.

“Full grown giba sure are big! Even if I had a ton of lives to spare, it would never be enough for me to be willing to deal with having something like that chase me.”

“Yeah, the little giba have pretty cute faces, but this one must’ve looked real vicious when it was alive.”

Even so, this giba was only a medium-sized one. It wasn’t uncommon at all to see giba over a hundred kilos at the forest’s edge, and the lord of the forest was so big it would have been hard to measure. How scary would these folks think a beast like that was?

I guess that’s why having a giba as a show animal would be just as interesting as a black ape or gaaje leopard... Still, I can’t imagine a live giba ever following orders and doing tricks.

Even back in my home world, carnivorous cats and apes were sometimes used in shows. I hadn’t ever heard of pigs or boars doing tricks, though. Considering

we were talking about a whole other world with an ecosystem all its own, maybe a comparison like that wasn't valid, but I still couldn't picture a giba being obedient enough to be used in a performance.

Still, this is a world where they have huge lizards pulling wagons, so I guess a giba doing tricks wouldn't be all that odd.

At any rate, I figured the relationship between the people of the forest's edge and the Gamley Troupe was what mattered more. I'd had a pretty favorable impression of Pino and the others so far. I really didn't want anything to happen that would lead to there being bad blood between them and the people of the forest's edge.

If that Gamley guy were a bit less quirky, then I wouldn't be quite so worried. But he's got the same sort of feel about him as Kamyua Yoshu.

Knowing nothing of my thoughts, the Gamley Troupe's tent stood silent across the road from us.

Shortly before the upper fifth hour, people started crowding around, waiting for whole roast kimyuus and fruit wine to be distributed. It looked to be an even larger crowd than the one we saw on the day of dawn.

When Yumi arrived a little while later, pushing her stall into place, she provided a bit of an explanation. "Well, of course. More people have arrived to visit Genos at this point, and I mean, it's the day of the sun's peak. That means there's going to be an interesting show in the middle of the day."

"A show? So someone is going to perform tricks?"

"If they did, maybe then I'd be willing to throw them a half coin or whatever. I can't say it's anything I'm particularly looking forward to."

The meaning behind Yumi's statement became clear minutes later. The nobles were putting on a parade alongside the distribution of the day's meat and fruit wine.

Actually, it was more like a daimyo's procession than a parade. In addition to the deliveries of food and drink, there was a stream of totos-drawn carriages proceeding down the street. Standing at the front of the procession was the head of the ducal guard, Melfried, and the vehicles behind him were being

closely guarded by soldiers clad in white.

The soldiers were brandishing their spears in an exaggerated manner, and a number were pulling unhitched totos along with them. It certainly wasn't every day you saw so many soldiers here in town. There were undoubtedly members of the nobility riding in those carriages.

The parade was marching onward with almost mechanical precision. The first of what looked to be around twenty or so carriages had already advanced a fair distance away, and I guessed that we had the middle of the line in front of us now.

As the crowd continued to make all kinds of noise, a tall figure emerged onto the roof of the lead totos carriage. Perhaps there was a staircase or something on the inside, but however it was done, the silhouette of a man had just suddenly appeared there. I couldn't make out many details from this distance, but he looked to be clad in the same sort of pure-white armor that the ducal guards wore. A violet tassel flowed from the crown of the silver helmet on his head.

"Citizens of the Saturas lands! Guests from all around Selva, Jagar, and Sym visiting us here in Genos! It is now just five days until the fall and rebirth of the sun god!" the man's clear voice resounded throughout the street. Though it was a bit muffled due to the helmet, it was undoubtedly the voice of Duke Marstein Genos. "Now, let us all partake in meat and wine to celebrate the ceremony of revival! To the sun god!"

A shout of "To the sun god!" that seemed to shake the very town itself erupted from the crowd. Only the people of the forest's edge and a handful of others weren't cheering along.

Several people had started distributing kimyuus meat and barrels of fruit wine from the rear wagon in the meantime. The crowd cheered even more at that, extolling the sun god and Duke Genos.

"That's what I meant. You're used to seeing nobles, so that probably wasn't interesting to you at all, right?" Yumi called out as she passed by us, holding a wooden box packed with meat.

"Yeah. Still, I never expected the lord of the land himself to make an

appearance, so that was a bit of a surprise.”

“Hmph. He only parades around the post town all pompously like that for the sun god’s revival festival and big important weddings, and with all that armor on, there’s no telling what kind of face he’s making when he looks at us, or even if that’s really the lord of the land himself in the first place.”

That must have been a precaution to guard against arrows. After all, someone as skilled as Ludo Ruu or Jeeda could easily hit him with a bow from the side of the road.

At any rate, though Yumi was wearing a bitter look on her face as a resident of the backstreets of the post town, everyone else was happily cheering away. Even if most of their good mood was thanks to the fruit wine, it would still be exceedingly rare for anyone to let their animosity toward the nobility show at a time like this.

“Rather than sharing joy with the residents of the land, it’s more like they’re making a display of their power while placating the hearts of the citizens with meat and wine,” Ai Fa remarked as she stood next to me, though it didn’t seem like she particularly cared. “Still, it isn’t as if it’s hurting anyone, and the townsfolk do appear to be happy. If we look at it as proof that the problems caused by Cyclaeus and his brother have finally been put to rest, then I suppose we should be glad as well.”

“Yeah, I guess that sounds about right.”

It was true that if Marstein had chosen to handle the situation differently back then, I might have seen things in a totally different light now. Kamyua Yoshu had once said that Marstein valued his reputation in the capital highly, but it seemed he also had to consider the popular opinion of his people with equal importance. If he had pardoned Cyclaeus and Ciluel’s crimes once they were revealed, failed to revise his handling of the people of the forest’s edge, or executed Barthas as a remnant of the Red Beards, he never would have been able to hold a parade like this.

The procession then resumed its march, leaving behind nothing but a wild commotion in its wake. The whole roast giba was already close to done, and there was smoke starting to rise here and there from the various stalls cooking

kimyuus. The street was full of the sound of drinks being poured and cups clacking together as voices cheered, “To the sun god!”

“So this is a festival in Genos...” Granny Jiba commented as she approached us with Mia Lea Ruu and six hunters. Ai Fa turned their way, frowning and looking a bit worried.

“Granny Jiba, are you feeling all right? It’s been some time since you moved around this much, so don’t push yourself too hard.”

“I’m not pushing myself at all... But I’m sorry for doing nothing except making you all worry...”

“You have nothing to be sorry for! It’s only natural for us to want to fulfill the request of our beloved elder!” Dan Rutim, one of the guards, remarked with a hearty chuckle. “Still, you certainly seem to have gotten your energy back, Jiba Ruu! Your walking’s still unsteady because of your bad legs, but other than that, it’s like you’re a whole twenty years younger! I’m extremely glad to see you doing so well!”

“Thank you, Dan Rutim... By the way, won’t you be getting any fruit wine? You toasted together with some townsfolk last time, did you not?”

“Hmm? Did Gazraan tell you that?! Well, even if I won’t be chewed out for drinking wine, I’ve got to help protect you today! So I decided to exercise a bit of restraint!”

“Is that so? What a shame... I pushed to make my selfish request happen because I wanted to watch the people of the forest’s edge and the townsfolk getting along...”

“I see! Well then, why don’t I go grant your wish?!” Dan Rutim readily replied, leaving me dumbfounded. He turned to face Jiza Ruu with a wide grin. “That said, I can’t simply leave Jiba Ruu’s side, right?! Would having a wine barrel brought over here suffice?”

“As long as you carry out your guard duty, you can do as you please.”

It seemed even Jiza Ruu didn’t care to try to rein Dan Rutim in. The former Rutim clan head plunged into the crowd and returned with a huge wine barrel and a number of townsfolk.

“What, the meat isn’t roasted yet? The sun’s gonna hit its peak soon, isn’t it?”

“Ooh, that’s a delicious smell. I just can’t get enough of that dripping fat!”

Folks from the west and south were energetically calling out to us with comments like that, their faces flushed from drinking. Meanwhile, Jiza Ruu cautiously moved Granny Jiba a few steps farther away.

“You sure have a lot of men here today! Y’all should drink as much fruit wine as you want too! That’s how you celebrate the sun god, right?” one of the southerners shouted out, but after Jiza Ruu sent a glance at all the other hunters, only the friendly Giran Ririn said anything in response to their call. However, Granny Jiba was still watching them intently from where she was sitting on a cloth that Mia Lea Ruu had laid out.

Nearly an hour later, the whole roast giba was finally finished. Some sharp-eyed folks were already starting to gather around, even as we were still dealing with our braziers. It seemed we had earned quite a reputation after the last time, which had led to us getting this huge crowd.

“Hold on for just a moment! We’ll start cutting the meat soon!”

Toor Deen and I were handling the young giba, which was an actual proper whole roast. We cut the meat in the same way we had before, with people snatching it up so quickly that it never even got a chance to pile up on the plate.

Everyone was looking satisfied as they stuffed their cheeks with giba meat, with no real differences between those from the west, the south, or the east. Since most of them had been drinking, they really didn’t hold back, even compared to how things were during our usual business hours. I just hoped that their lack of reservation would serve to leave an even stronger impression on Granny Jiba.

That went for Jiza Ruu and Sufira Zaza as well. The two of them were staring even more intently at the sights around them than Granny Jiba. I had to wonder what they thought about all this, especially when it came to the question of whether our business here in the post town was a boon or a poison for the people of the forest’s edge.

“Hmm, perhaps I’ll try some of the ribs from over there today!” Dan Rutim

said as he headed over to Reina Ruu's stall and helped himself to some rib meat. Cuts from an adult giba like theirs probably felt more substantial than meat from a young one. Giran Ririn went over and received some meat of a similar cut as well, which he bit into with a smile.

After that, several members of Dora's household arrived, and things got even more lively around our stalls. In no time at all, Dora and his sons were drinking alongside Dan Rutim, while Tara started hanging around Rimee Ruu's stall.

"It seems like the meat will run out in a flash again today, doesn't it?" Toor Deen quietly whispered to me as she continued helping to cut the meat.

"That's true. Maybe next holiday we should go big and add two more stalls so we can sell five giba worth of meat."

"Huh...? But the Fa and Ruu would need to pay for that meat, right?"

"Yeah, but this is a once-a-year event. Of course, it's all going to depend on how Ai Fa and Donda Ruu feel about the matter."

"Do you really think I would be opposed to the idea?" Ai Fa asked, cutting in between us. "It's not like I have any way to spend all that money to begin with, so do as you please. As long as the people of the forest's edge have enough to eat, I don't care how much giba meat you use for other things."

"Got it. In that case, let's try coming up with a plan to that effect."

Even as we had that conversation, the amount of giba meat was visibly decreasing. As I was thinking to myself that in ten minutes or so it would be a good idea to remove the brain and eyes, a familiar group approached the stall.

"Seems like we were a bit too casual about deciding when to come over. That giba looks like it'll be nothing but bones pretty soon."

"Ah, welcome. Yes, you really did make it just in time."

Naturally, it was the members of the Gamley Troupe. Today, their number included the acrobat, Pino; the strongman, Doga; the flute player, Nachara; the beast tamer, Shantu; the vase man, Dilo; the minstrel, Neeya; and the twins, Arun and Amin.

"Ah, my beautiful lady. Would you at least allow me to know your name

today?” Neeya asked Ai Fa incorrigibly with his instrument on his back. My clan head silently turned away, while Jiza Ruu adjusted his position to block Granny Jiba from their view.

“Hey, we came all this way, so you should all make sure to grab a slice. Don’t follow this blockhead’s example and just stand around chewing jerky.” At Pino’s urging, the twins timidly reached out their hands. After glancing at the two of them out of the corner of her eyes, Pino shot Neeya a look filled with contempt. “So, you only came to try to pick up a girl after all? There really is no cure for being such a playboy.”

“With my heart full to bursting, how could I possibly have room for meat? Still, I suppose someone as boorish as you will never understand such a thing,” Neeya remarked with a dejected shrug. “Besides, how many times must I say it? Whether it’s giba meat or whatever else, I have no intention of eating shoddy food prepared by the side of the road. I’m expected at a tea party in the castle town after this as well.”

“Hm. So even a mere traveling performer can become this pompous just from getting a pass, can he? You were living in a gutter before the troupe leader took you in, right?”

“I’ve long since forgotten that distant past! And it would be terrible to ruin my stomach with something like giba meat. Only poor folks incapable of buying enough karon would ever appreciate such a thing.”

“I’m amazed you would let words that foolish spew out of your mouth in front of this many hunters from the forest’s edge... I just hope they don’t start disliking me simply because I’m associated with you.” Pino was wearing an uncharacteristic look like she was about to click her tongue, and then she turned her gaze toward Jiza Ruu back behind the stall. “My sincerest apologies, Jiza Ruu. If you’re unable to suppress your anger, then please, go ahead and take it out on this blockhead any way you like. As long as you leave his mouth and fingers alone, he won’t have any trouble earning his keep.”

“That man is hardly the only one to speak to us in such a way... Up until a few months ago, no one in town would ever dare to try giba meat,” Jiza Ruu replied, though it was impossible to get a read on the tone of his voice. “But if he goes

on to mock us people of the forest's edge like that, I won't be able to remain silent. Please be warned of that, if nothing else."

Though Jiza Ruu was wearing his usual gentle expression, it was hard not to get chills when you knew the man's true nature. Of course, Neeya knew nothing of that, so he didn't seem intimidated in the least, judging from the grin that remained plastered on his face.

"It isn't as if I'm ridiculing you people of the forest's edge. I just feel sorry for you all, having to happily gulp down such foul-looking meat..."

"That's why I was saying not to run your mouth. You really are an incurable blockhead... Perhaps you weren't aware that Asuta here is a great chef who has been invited to the castle town multiple times," Pino remarked, shooting Neeya a saucy yet chilly glare. "Asuta's giba cooking has even earned the approval of the lord of Genos himself. Do you think even the lord of that huge castle is someone to feel sorry for, you foolish minstrel?"

"That certainly is quite the big talk. Just where did you hear such idle gossip?"

"You really have to ask? Kamyua was all excited about it last time we met, wasn't he? But, well, you have trouble dealing with him, so you were probably curled up in a corner where his voice couldn't reach you."

"Hmph..." Neeya muttered, finally going silent. Then he looked me over for probably the first time ever. "That must have been one of those jokes Kamyua Yoshu is so skilled at telling. There's no way such a seedy-looking fellow would ever be invited to the—"

"Hey," a voice interjected, sharply cutting Neeya's statement off. Of course, the identity of the speaker would be a surprise to nobody. "Did you not hear what Jiza Ruu said? As the head of the Fa clan, I won't simply stay silent if you mock my clan member."

After glancing restlessly around, Neeya's gaze finally settled on Ai Fa.

"H-Huh? Was that you who spoke just now, oh lovely lady?"

"Shut that mouth of yours right now or leave this place immediately. If you do so, I'll overlook your crime." Ai Fa's eyes were blazing bright and there were wrinkles forming around her nose. It was the look of a wildcat, no less fierce

than a gaaje leopard or a silver lion.

“Wh-What has you so upset? Your clan member? Do you mean...?” Neeya questioned, then his eyes shot open wide in shock. “This young fellow couldn’t be your husband, could he?! That’s too ridiculous to believe!”

“That doesn’t matter in the least! If you do not shut your mouth this very moment—”

Ai Fa’s shouting was suddenly cut off by a loud smack. Pino had suddenly stretched up and smacked her palm right into Neeya’s face. Her straightforward strike caused Neeya to stumble backward with a sharp cry, while Pino went “Hmph” and wiped her hand on her clothing. “If I let a blockhead like you do as you please, this really will end in bloodshed. Doga...”

The large silent man then grabbed hold of the nape of Neeya’s neck and hoisted the minstrel’s slender body up over his shoulder.

“My deepest apologies. As you asked, we will go ahead and leave. He’ll be getting at least two or three more smacks, so I hope that you can forgive us for this.”

“Stop, you idiot! My instrument! You’ll damage my instrument!” Neeya wailed as Doga strode heavily back over toward the tent. Despite not knowing anything about what was going on, the passersby were cheering at the display.

With that, Pino and company disappeared, and Ludo Ruu commented in astonishment, “You know, I’m amazed that guy’s managed to live this long like that. It was like watching a giiz mouse wailing in front of a giant madarama snake with its mouth open wide.” It certainly was rare to see someone so bad at sensing the feelings of the people around him. Perhaps he was missing something crucial to being human. “Still, you were being a bit too short tempered there, Ai Fa. Was the phrase ‘seedy-looking’ really worth getting that angry about all on its own?”

“Would you be able to stay silent if Rimee Ruu was mocked in such a way, Ludo Ruu?”

“Why are you using Rimee as an example? Hmm, still, you’re right that it would be hard for me to say nothing if that happened...”

At that point, Jiza Ruu chimed in with narrowed eyes after having given the matter careful consideration. “That Pino girl seems to have a strong, earnest heart for someone from town. But there’s no guarantee the same is true of all her compatriots... You still intend to visit them even so, Ludo?”

“Hmm? I don’t really care either way, but Rimee and the others want to go see them.”

Yes, Rimee Ruu and several of the others had planned to head over to the Gamley Troupe’s tent again tonight. While he was reluctant to allow it, Donda Ruu seemed to have reached the conclusion that another bandit attack was highly unlikely, but naturally, Jiza Ruu hadn’t fully agreed.

“As long as Donda, the head of our clan, does not change his opinion on the matter, I will accompany you as well today.”

“Ah, sounds good. That black ape is one heck of a sight to see. I mean, Granny Jiba’s father and all the others from back then used to hunt them in the black forest, after all,” Ludo Ruu stated, and I heard Granny Jiba laugh from behind Jiza Ruu.

“Donda would never give his permission for this old bag of bones to walk around town at night or go anywhere near that dubious tent...but I get the feeling it would be good for you to see a black ape as the next clan head, and a leading clan head at that...”

“I see,” Jiza Ruu calmly replied. When I snuck a peak behind him, I found Granny Jiba wearing her usual gentle smile.

“Still, there really are all sorts of different folks here in town... Such an interesting place...”

“‘Interesting’ isn’t quite the word I would use,” Ai Fa muttered with a displeased look, but Granny Jiba just kept on smiling.

At any rate, there was only a little of the whole roast left, so the end of our morning work for the day of the sun’s peak was fast approaching.

And then, night fell.

Once again, we had planned to run our stalls and do some nighttime business in the post town.

As for the amount of food we had prepared, we had added thirty servings of the daily special and fifty each of the soup and pasta, which was the most we could manage at the moment.

Furthermore, we were trying out something new today: once the giba burgers and giba manju that took longer to prepare sold out, we would switch to selling myamuu giba and poitan wraps out of the same stalls.

Since they used minced meat, giba burgers and giba manju required more preparation than the other dishes. Therefore, we had only made 120 of each of them. But when we served myamuu giba or poitan wraps, we always made 160 of those. Since there was a difference of half a red coin in their costs, they all ended up being equally profitable for us.

However, the number of customers we served was more important to us than our profits. Right now, our immediate goal was to teach as many people as possible how delicious giba meat actually was. Since the more labor-intensive giba burgers and giba manju had just happened to be on the schedule today, we had decided to make the same number of them as usual and try for another forty each of the myamuu giba and poitan wraps. If we could sell all of those as well, I figured we could maintain the same number of customers while also raising profits.

And so, we had ended up preparing 1150 meals in total. If we could sell that many with just five stalls, we would be seeing several times as many customers as other places did. Naturally, being able to have 400 servings of soup was a huge part of that, but still, it really was an extraordinary number. This was 160 more servings than we'd had on the day of dawn, but since we had sold out much earlier than expected that night, I figured the odds were in our favor, as long as the flow of customers didn't fall off drastically.

We'd also finally gotten a canopy to put over the space without tables and chairs, and we had some leeway this time in terms of tableware. Having learned from the events of the day of dawn, we had made every effort to be as ready as

possible for tonight.

As for guards, Granny Jiba was no longer present, so we had gone back to our original number of twelve. But once again, they were specially selected elites. The stalls and the restaurant space had six hunters assigned to each of them, under the supervision of the three brothers from the main Ruu house. Also, even though Sufira Zaza was supposed to be just an observer, it seemed like she was helping out in the restaurant space too.

“This really is like a banquet for the townsfolk...” Fei Beim muttered from beside me, where she was working her first-ever night shift.

It was true that it was feeling more and more like a festival as the days went by. For tonight, there were flutes and drums being played all about, and I had even seen people happily dancing in the street. A group of mainly young women had formed a ring off to the side of the road, where they were twirling about merrily. There were even a large number of traveling performers and minstrels scattered about, aside from those of the Gamley Troupe. You could hear some sort of music no matter where you went, making the festive atmosphere all the stronger.

The Gamley Troupe’s tent also seemed to be drawing a large crowd today. There was a line forming outside, and it didn’t show any signs of getting shorter. Some of the other performers were even setting up to do their acts in that area off to the side of the road in order to take advantage of the waiting crowd and earn some money. With everything that was going on, the celebration here at the northernmost part of town was definitely just as lively as it was at the center of the stall area.

“And this banquet continues for over ten days, right? Truly astounding.”

“Yeah. But it seems that the evening of the day of the downfall is the festival’s climax. Supposedly, everybody’s going to be exhausted once the silver month arrives, so the celebration is going to last for a total of ten days in the end.”

“That’s already plenty long, I’d say. I suppose that means we’re finally halfway through as of today.”

She sounded like she was displeased with all of this, but I wasn’t particularly worried. That sour, unsociable look she always wore wasn’t a big deal either

once you got used to it, and then you'd realize that she was actually a rather sensitive young woman. The disparity was honestly kind of charming. Even Sufira Zaza thought so.

The two of us were in charge of selling a brand new dish tonight: deep-fried giba. Honestly, it was pretty much just a simplified version of the giba cutlets. It had only been two days since we'd last offered the cutlets for sale, but they were so popular that people were calling for us to add them to our menu permanently, so I had come up with this dish as a last resort.

The method for making them was simple and involved taking thin slices of sirloin and flavoring them with salt, then coating them in kimyuus egg and fuwano flour, and finally frying them in a large amount of reten oil. Since we kept the meat thin, it didn't take very long to heat through. The final result admittedly looked kind of flat, but the cuts were wide, so it was still a pretty hearty dish. Just like with the giba cutlets, I added Worcestershire sauce to half of the servings, and the other half got sheel juice. Both versions also included a fresh vegetable salad with a special dressing made from kiki juice.

We had decided to go bold and prepare 180 servings of this new dish—not as many as the 400 servings of the teriyaki stew we were offering, or the 250 of the carbonara, but it *was* a more expensive item at a price of two red coins. I just hoped it would make our customers as happy as our other dishes did.

Meanwhile, Myme and Yumi were there too, excited and working hard. This was also Myme's first time running her stall at night, and she had used the extra time during the day to prepare more meals, resulting in her having 150 ready to sell.

As the days went on, customers had started coming to Myme's stall at a faster and faster rate. To be honest, they might have been coming to her the fastest out of any of the giba cooking stalls. In fact, there seemed to be a fair number of customers who would order her cooking first, and then stand in line at Yumi's stall or ours while eating it.

Of course, her dish could be eaten with just your hands, and it didn't take all that long to prepare. However, lots of customers still seemed to prefer it over the giba manju and giba burgers, which were similar in those ways. There was

definitely something particular about her dish that was drawing people in.

As the lower sixth hour approached and the braziers in the street were set alight, two of the three pots Myme had prepared had been emptied out. As long as the flow of customers didn't slow down, she would sell the last of her hundred and fifty in another thirty or forty minutes. Yumi was over next to her and had opened her stall last, and it looked like she had still only sold around fifty or so servings.

"That's great! Round two starts for me as soon as all of you close up shop! There's no way cheap cooking like mine without any expensive ingredients could ever compete with what you make," Yumi said with a laugh. "But things are still pretty lively around town after you all leave. There are sales to be made in the later hours too."

She was a real natural-born child of the post town, something that made her incredibly reliable. I really could feel how Yumi and Myme were both wonderful allies and rivals for the people of the forest's edge.

"This certainly is quite a crowd," a voice called out around the time when the sun finally set to the west. When I turned to look, I found someone who made me feel a little nostalgic smiling at me: Zasshuma the bodyguard.

"Hey. It's been a while. So you're back in Genos?"

"I just arrived this evening. It's been more than a month since we last saw one another, hasn't it?"

Zasshuma had accompanied the investigators sent from Genos to deal with some disloyal individuals in Dabagg that we had discovered, and I hadn't seen him since. I had heard rumors he'd taken off on a journey to elsewhere, but had never gotten the details.

"I had planned to come back sooner, but another job came in while I was over there. I decided to take the opportunity to earn a few extra coins so I could enjoy the revival festival properly. Anyway, the crowd around here is incredible..."

"Ah ha ha. This is your first time seeing our outdoor restaurant, isn't it?"

"Yeah, and you'd better believe I'm astonished by it. I never expected giba

cooking would get *this* popular here in Genos,” Zasshuma said with a chuckle, then stroked his sturdy chin. “Well then, could I try some of your food now, as promised? You’ve got so many dishes I’m at a bit of a loss, so what do you think I should order?”

“Let’s see... This is a dish I made, and it may just be a limited-time item, so I would recommend it for you now. Also, that soup dish...and the pasta dish over next to us is a bit of a novelty, so that could be good too.”

“Hmm? Are you saying one dish isn’t enough to make a meal? Normally, just ordering two servings should be plenty.”

“Well, the price of giba meat has gone up, so we’ve been trying to keep both the amount and the price of each dish down. One or two may not be enough to fill you up, Zasshuma.”

“If it isn’t, then I can just order another dish. As long as giba meat’s as good as karon like you say, that is...”

It had probably been half a year at this point since I had first met Zasshuma, and finally, the time had come for him to give giba meat a try. It was enough to make me feel a little emotional.

“Oh, Dan and Gazraan Rutim should be over there in the restaurant. The two of them are on guard duty tonight.”

“Now, that’s something to look forward to. I should have bought more fruit wine.”

Zasshuma ordered the three dishes and disappeared, only for another unusual customer to arrive: the craftsman from the post town whom we often made use of.

“Huh? It’s pretty unexpected to see you here around the stalls.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have any work I need to be doing right now.”

This was the man who had helped us out with the tolos wagons, restaurant seating, and even our tableware. Though I didn’t see him all that often, we had been acquainted for around five months now. He was someone who didn’t get out and about very often, so I was pretty sure this was the first time I had ever

seen him in the stall area.

“Even I head outside and stretch my legs a little for the festival. And the younger folks at our place have been really praising your stalls too.”

Despite having a somewhat rough appearance, he was a good-natured fellow. Those younger folks he had mentioned were there behind him, drinking from their containers of fruit wine.

“Still, I never expected it to be this crowded. Looks like you’re pulling in more business than any of the other stalls around.”

“Yes, thankfully. Things have been going very well since the start of the revival festival.”

“Well, you just keep earning money and sending more business our way. We’ll make wagons, tables, chairs...whatever you need.”

The people of the forest’s edge were currently in the process of considering how to handle the reward money sent from the castle. If they decided to use it to purchase new wagons, we would surely be counting on him again.

“Well then, what should I order...? Hey, you were all going on and on about that weird winding dish, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right! It’s a bit tricky to eat, but it’s really tasty!”

“Oh, and that soup is excellent too.”

We always brought along some giba cooking whenever we went to see him, but the pasta and the stew would be totally new to him. He went ahead and ordered based on the recommendations of his young workers, then walked over to the restaurant space.

“You form bonds just as easily with the townsfolk as with us, don’t you, Asuta?” Fei Beim commented.

“Yeah, of course. They’re pretty different from the people of the forest’s edge, but they’re not all bad, you know.”

She went silent in response. Her expression remained just as displeased as always, but I could sense something had changed a little there as well.

When she next spoke up, it was after finishing another order and handing it over to the customers waiting in front of us.

“The members of the Beim don’t think fondly of the citizens of Genos...”

“Right. I’d imagine that’s true for most of the people of the forest’s edge.”

“Not really. The Beim have more of a reason to hate Genos than the other clans.” With the giba meat crackling away as it cooked, Fei Beim continued. “Have you heard about the person of the forest’s edge who was executed in Genos decades ago?”

“Yeah. A member of his clan was injured by criminals in town, and he broke the law in order to get vengeance, right?”

“That’s right. That hunter was the head of a clan under the Beim.” Fei Beim was speaking quietly, and with the crowd in the streets still just as lively as ever, the noise threatened to swallow up her words. “Since the crime was committed by the clan head, the clan lost its name. Those who remained all became members of the Beim. One of them was my mother, who was the daughter of the executed hunter and is now the wife of the current clan head.”

“I see...”

“Of course, my grandfather decided on his own to run off and get revenge rather than listen to those above him, so it made sense that he was executed. I know it’s illogical for us to hate Genos for that...but it was townsfolk who broke the law first, so isn’t it only natural to find it sickening that this tragedy befell the Beim?”

“Yes, it is...” I replied as I pulled some freshly fried meat onto the wire mesh.

The customers waiting for the completed dish hadn’t heard Fei Beim’s comments and kept on happily indulging in their fruit wine.

“It’s not like I think we should raise a complaint about it after all this time, though. I just want you to understand that my father and mother aren’t opposed to the idea of doing business in the post town for no reason.”

“I understand. Thank you for telling me all that. I never knew that the Beim clan had something like that in their history,” I said while coating some fresh

meat and adding it to the pan. “I had heard it was a terrible incident, but I hadn’t thought about how his clan members must have felt. Even if it did happen decades ago, it’s only natural that the people involved wouldn’t just forget about it... It’s embarrassing, how shortsighted I’ve been about this.”

Fei Beim didn’t say anything in response.

“I’m grateful that the Beim clan is trying to do a proper job of observing our actions despite feeling that way. Really, thank you so much...”

“I can’t see any reason for you to thank me...” Fei Beim bluntly replied as she laid out some vegetables atop a couple plates. Then I added Worcestershire sauce and sheel juice to the cuts of meat that had finished having the oil drip off them and moved them to the plates as well. Our customers paid for and accepted their food, then headed over to the restaurant. Of course, a new set of customers immediately took their place.

“Fei Beim, the inn owner who loans us these stalls, Milano Mas, lost relatives to the actions of the Suun clan ten years back,” I said, making her shoot me a questioning look. “His wife and her brother both died because of them. But since Zattsu and Tei Suun have been judged now, he’s let go of his hatred for the people of the forest’s edge. Well, at least I’d like to think so. I don’t know how he truly feels. But he has been warming up to quite a few of us.”

“I see...”

“Because people like Milano Mas and the Beim clan who have suffered so much are starting to put aside their grudges, the forest’s edge and Genos have been able to forge a new bond. I don’t know what will happen from here on out, but I want to make sure we all remember that as we keep trying to find the best path forward for us.”

Unsurprisingly, Fei Beim simply replied, “Fair enough.”

However, I couldn’t see any doubt or hesitation shining in her eyes. The Beim hadn’t come nearly as far as Milano Mas had in terms of casting aside their anger. But even so, they were at least trying to determine whether they should keep holding on to their hatred and rejecting Genos, or if they should instead listen to the words of the Fa and Ruu and form a new bond with Genos in order to become more prosperous.

The people of the forest's edge had all sworn to live proper lives in order to atone for the crimes of the Suun clan. Meanwhile, the people of Genos were keeping watch in order to determine whether or not that oath would hold true. At the same time, we were observing them in turn. It wasn't just those with strong doubts like the Beim, the Zaza, and Jiza Ruu, as even Donda Ruu and Ai Fa were watching carefully to determine whether Genos was worthy of their friendship as we did business here in the post town.

I couldn't help but recall the exchange between Granny Jiba and Granny Mishil the night before. The past wasn't something to simply be cast aside. Our efforts to move forward from here were meaningless if we didn't fully acknowledge the painful past. I once again felt that truth very strongly as I watched the folks before me drunkenly enjoying their banquet.

Time passed steadily onward, with our sales proceeding smoothly.

Just as expected, Myme sold out of her dish first, roughly an hour and a half after opening for business, and she returned to the Turan lands with Bartha escorting her. Roughly forty to fifty minutes later, the giba burgers and giba manju sold out, so we swapped the pot and steaming baskets out for a metal tray and started selling myamuu giba and poitan wraps.

I was pleased to note that the deep-fried giba sold out next. It took a good bit of time and effort to prepare, but still not as much as the carbonara. We had brought fewer servings of it than the carbonara, though, so it seemed sensible to conclude that the two dishes had proven to be similarly popular.

Fei Beim and I moved over to the restaurant to help wait tables and wash dishes, and before long the myamuu giba sold out too. Despite being the oldest dishes on offer, giba burgers and myamuu giba remained just as popular as always.

Now four of us had been freed up, meaning we had quite a bit of leeway with the work around the restaurant. While that was a good thing, I couldn't help but feel that it wasn't quite ideal. In particular, Toor Deen was having to deal with the most troublesome of the dishes at the three remaining stalls—the carbonara—which I felt bad about.

The dish that's selling best is the soup, but they fully prepare it beforehand, so they just need to reheat it. Toor Deen has to constantly boil pasta and then cook it some more with the other ingredients once that step is done, so she must not have any time to rest.

If we kept our rotation schedule as it was, the next holiday would see Toor Deen in charge of the carbonara again rather than the giba curry. Maybe when the time came, I could set things up so I could cook some of the carbonara at my stall too after the daily special sold out in order to lighten her load?

No, maybe I should make curry the special on that day. Fortunately, it seems to have been well received, so I don't think I'll hear any complaints... In that case, even if Yamiru Lea sells out of giba manju first, I could leave the curry up to her and move over to handling the pasta.

Forming such plans was also an enjoyable part of my job.

Not long after, the poitan wraps were all gone, and the teriyaki stew bottomed out after that. That just left the carbonara, which sold out as well around three hours after we had opened.

"We really did sell all of it. So, what should we do for tomorrow?" Reina Ruu asked while washing a stack of plates. Even if we had sold all of our meals, there were still customers in the restaurant, so we were currently in the process of cleaning up after them.

"Hmm... We could be bold and prepare the same amount as today, but will we see more customers than we did yesterday? We have preparations to handle too, so we can't extend our business hours too much during the day."

"That's true. Then why don't we go ahead and just make the same amount of soup as today? If there's any left over, we can use it for dinner."

"Right. I'll leave that up to you. In that case, though, maybe I should prepare a dish of my own that we could still use even if there are leftovers."

The Ruu clan were running a fine business of their own, with Reina and Sheera Ruu handling the cooking while Tsuvai was in charge of managing the money. We might have been fumbling around a bit during the festival, but they were really handling it admirably.

“Then three days later, we’ll finally be heading to the castle town. It’s been a while since I last saw Varkas, so I’m really looking forward to it,” Reina Ruu said.

“Yeah. I haven’t shared a kitchen with him since before we went to Dabagg...so it’s been roughly fifty days now.”

Timalo was going to be there too, and I hadn’t seen him in even longer. Reina and Sheera Ruu didn’t really care about him, but now that I had learned a fair amount about the methods used in the castle town, I was looking forward to having an opportunity to analyze his cooking from another angle.

And then there was that one other concern I’d had in the corner of my mind.

“Now that I think about it, I haven’t seen Roy for a while. I wonder what he’s been up to, and where.”

“Who knows,” Reina Ruu replied with a frown. “That man lives in the castle town as well, so it isn’t strange at all not to see him.”

When Roy had tried Reina and Sheera Ruu’s giba hot pot stew, he had been seriously shocked by it and hadn’t shown his face before us since. He’d also had an argument with Reina Ruu that time, so the matter had been weighing on my mind.

“For some reason, whenever I talk to him I get all worked up and I can’t help noticing how petty I can be, so I don’t see any issue with him vanishing.”

“Yeah, I get that.”

I didn’t want Reina Ruu to have to deal with any more stress at a time like this, but I still thought to myself that once the revival festival was over, I would use my connections through Yang to ask about what was going on with Roy.

“Asuta, Reina, we’re all done over here... The only things left to do are to wait for the rest of the customers to leave and wash the remaining dishes, so do you want me to handle that?” Vina Ruu asked, having been given the task of cleaning up the stalls. After this, we were set to head to the Gamley Troupe’s tent.

“Thank you. But do you really not want to come with us?”

“No. If you bring even more people than you currently are, it will be tough on

Jiza... I don't mind holding down the fort..."

It was true that our group today included five chefs and Tara, but that was basically the same number as last time. Rimee Ruu hadn't been scheduled to be on duty today, but she had used the same method Lala Ruu had last time in order to join in.

"All right, we'll take you up on that kind offer and head over now. After all, it's already past the time everyone would usually be in bed at the forest's edge."

"It certainly is... All of you sure do have a lot of energy..." Vina Ruu said, seeing us off with a sensual sigh as we hurried over to Jiza Ruu. Next we needed to determine who would be our guards for the night.

"You'll be going with Asuta, Reina, Rimee, Ama Min Rutim, and the Sudra woman, as well as the vegetable seller's daughter for a total of six, correct?" Jiza Ruu asked, stroking his cheek and thinking deeply. "Then for guards we'll have Ludo, Ai Fa, and myself...as well as Gazraan and Dan Rutim, and one more..."

"Ah, if you don't mind, could I join in again, Jiza Ruu?" Giran Ririn chimed in.

With narrowed eyes, Jiza Ruu replied, "Very well. I have no concerns at all about your skills. In that case, I'll ask you to take care of the guard work here, Darmu."

"Right, understood."

"We'll form pairs of one man to one woman again. Reina can come with me, and the rest should work out the same as last time," Jiza Ruu ordered. Lala and Shin Ruu were absent, and Reina Ruu had been swapped in for Sheera Ruu, but otherwise the arrangements were identical. "Even if there's no need to fear another bandit attack happening, make sure not to let your guard down. Now then, let's get going."

And so, we once again closed out the day by heading to that giant tent for a nighttime show.

Things were really lively about the Gamley Troupe's tent. There was a line of twenty or so people out front, and maybe ten lined up for the fortune teller's booth off to the side. Their clientele unsurprisingly skewed young, but it wasn't as if there weren't any families or even old folks there at all. However, the majority of the people in line for the fortune teller were young women, with some men who looked to be merchants sprinkled in here and there.

"I'm looking forward to seeing Huey. I'd love to come again when it's bright out," Rimee Ruu said with a dazzling smile as she walked, holding hands with Tara. From what I could tell, the ones looking forward to the show most were that young pair, Dan Rutim, and Giran Ririn. But even though they were acting reserved, Ama Min Rutim and Yun Sudra must have been secretly looking forward to it too, as they had asked to come again.

While I was thinking about that, the line behind us was steadily growing longer and longer. Before I knew it, there were at least fifteen more customers waiting back there.

I was just starting to worry that the current pace of admission would result in us getting back pretty late, when the ten people in front of us suddenly shuffled into the tent.

"Oh, is there a limit to how many people can enter at once?" I pondered.

"Hmm?" Ai Fa hummed, turning my way. "If they were to allow multiple groups to come into the performance rooms at different times, many of the troupe's guests would miss some of the surprises they have in store. They must manage things so that groups of ten or so enter, then they allow a bit of a break before they bring in the next group."

"I don't quite get it, but it seems like we won't have to wait as long as I thought..."

Just as Ai Fa had said, less than two minutes later, we were stepping into the dark tent. There were around twenty people lined up in the passage, but ten of them vanished beyond the dividing curtain before long. Our turn had finally arrived.

"Ah, so you decided to come again tonight. Welcome, everyone from the forest's edge." The acrobat Pino was the one in charge of reception for the day.

“You brought the paplua flowers, correct? In that case, no need to pay.”

“Thank you. Um, are you on your own today?”

“Yes, since that blockheaded minstrel went and vanished all of a sudden. I really chewed him out earlier, so he must be off somewhere on the verge of tears. Thanks to that, I’ve been stuck here with no time to rest.”

After I put the mass of red flowers we had received in the woven basket and we killed a bit of time with idle chatter, Pino pulled up the curtain.

“Well then, go right ahead and enjoy this dream for a short while.”

By this point, I was fully familiar with the inside of the tent. Aside from Jiza and Reina Ruu, this was everyone else’s second time coming here, so we were able to continue forward without any fear of getting lost. Even so, it was still a mysterious place, like a nighttime thicket had been bottled up inside. Those of us who weren’t hunters had uncertain footing, and it felt as if my senses were being thrown out of whack. It really was like wandering half-awake through a dream.

When we reached the first break in the path, we got a good view of the silver lion and gaaje leopard. Rimee Ruu and Tara got terribly excited, while Reina Ruu was seeing them for the first time and remarked “My...” in surprise.

“We really aren’t in any danger?” Jiza Ruu questioned.

“We’re not,” Gazraan Rutim replied. “Look into the eyes of those beasts. Though they are on guard, I can’t see any malice in them at all. Wouldn’t you agree? If they were commanded to do so by their master, they could even capture bandits without injuring them.”

“I simply cannot imagine a giba being tamed as such...”

After Rimee Ruu and Tara got their fill of Huey’s and Sara’s beautiful, majestic figures, we turned down the path. Awaiting us next was the vase man, Dilo. Rimee Ruu had taken the lead, and when she stepped past the curtain I heard her remark, “Ooh!”

We once again found a vase sitting in the center of the room. However, there was something even stranger there next to it: a round black shape around the

same size as the vase.

Once all twelve of us had stepped inside, the black object suddenly started moving as if it was dancing. It bounced around the vase for a while, then rolled here and there about the room. It was just wriggling about without any arms or legs, but still, it was seriously moving. It was easy to guess what it really was, that didn't change how truly strange it felt.

After around thirty seconds or so, the black bundle suddenly stretched out vertically. Two arms slithered out from its sides, and then finally, a face flipped up into view. In the blink of an eye, the black ball had transformed into a tall, slender man clad in a long robe.

"The Gamley Troupe welcomes you... I am the nighttime guide, Dilo..."

"So it really was you! You sure can do some bizarre things with your body!" Dan Rutim remarked.

"The path splits in two from here. The right door takes you to the knight's room, and the left to the twins'... Which fate will you choose, dear guests?" the vase man, Dilo, continued in a gloomy tone, as if he hadn't heard Dan Rutim at all.

"The show that knight put on last time was incredibly fun to watch! But today I'd like to enjoy the other performance instead. What do you all say?"

No one had any objections, so we headed through the left curtain and found ourselves on a new path that was much narrower than the one we had followed last time. I could hear Rolo the knight king's strange cry coming from the other side of the divider.

Eventually, we reached yet another hanging curtain. When Dan Rutim pulled it open, an enchanting sound suddenly permeated the darkness. It was the flute player, Nachara, who we found waiting for us there.

She was a beautiful woman with somewhat dark skin and a bewitching appearance. Her dark-brown hair was tied up high atop her head, and she wore a long dress adorned in finely embroidered patterns. She was sitting and playing her instrument at the far end of the room with her legs stretched out to one side. It was a mysterious sound that seemed to penetrate deep inside my mind

and made me think of the odd tone Pino talked in.

As if summoned by that melody, the twins then appeared from behind a pair of hanging curtains off to the left and right. Arun and Amin were a young boy and girl, as adorable as little angels. The pair were clad in beautiful, shining, iridescent, silklike attire. It must have been the same material that women of the forest's edge wore for banquets. Their sleeves were wide, and the hems fluttered all the way down to their feet. Under the light of the lanterns, they were giving off a truly mystical shine in the dim chamber.

The twins kept on dancing. Their movements to the left and right were in perfect symmetry, so precise that it felt like there had to be a mirror in the room. Their young yet well-proportioned faces remained expressionless, making them look almost like dolls that someone had life breathed into. The mysterious melody from Nachara's flute combined with their quiet beauty to leave me awash in a truly otherworldly feeling.

I couldn't tell how much time passed after that, but eventually the tune from the flute quieted a good bit, and the twins moved right next to one another in the center of the room.

One of them pulled out a black cloth from somewhere around their chest and wrapped it around the eyes of the other. The blindfolded one crouched down with their back to us, while the other silently approached us.

"The Gamley Troupe welcomes you... Please, go ahead and touch me somewhere."

"Hmm? What would the point be in touching you?"

"It's part of our performance..."

I figured we were probably dealing with the male twin, Arun. Arun stood there emotionlessly in front of us, his arms spread out to either side, clad in iridescent material.

Dan Rutim was the closest, so he tilted his head and then lightly placed his hand on top of the boy's hair. At that very moment, the blindfolded Amin whispered, "The head..." Dan Rutim knitted his brow, then poked Arun's right hand. "The right hand..."

“My! What kind of trick is this?!”

Naturally, no one answered that question.

Her eyes sparkling with anticipation, Rimee Ruu pinched the hem of Arun’s clothing down by his feet. However, Amin didn’t say anything.

“My apologies... We can’t feel a touch that isn’t on our skin...”

With that, Rimee Ruu gave him a little poke on the left foot, and Amin stated, “The left foot...”

“Hmm. What a mysterious act,” Giran Ririn said as he stepped forward with Yun Sudra and gave Arun’s right ear a firm pinch.

“The right ear...”

After that, Tara touched his left hand and Ludo Ruu pinched his lower jaw, and Amin remained right on the mark.

Had everyone else sensed that Arun was a boy as well? After all, only the men and children were touching him. It was a custom at the forest’s edge that you weren’t to touch someone of the opposite sex unnecessarily once you passed the age of ten.

“Amin and I were originally a single person... As a result, we can sense one another’s bodies as if they were our own, even at a distance...”

“What a curious tale,” Jiza Ruu said as he and Reina Ruu stepped forward. Suddenly, his burly arm reached out and he grabbed ahold of Arun’s left shoulder, making Amin cry out, “Ow!” followed by a whisper of, “The left shoulder...”

“I see... How truly strange.”

Arun gave a deep bow, then walked backward toward Amin while still facing our way. His pale fingers removed the blindfold, and then Amin also turned to face us. With that, the twins once again bowed their heads, and the flute that had quietly been playing the whole time faded out.

“That concludes the twins’ performance. If it was to your liking, we would appreciate it if you showed us some generosity,” Nachara’s elegant voice stated, and then she played another note on her flute. In response, a young

gray beast toddled in from beyond the curtain.

“Ooh, it’s Druey! So this is where you were!”

Tara and Rimee Ruu took the initiative and tossed their half coins into the woven basket Druey held in his mouth before anyone else. Some of the women pleaded with Nachara, asking if they could hold Druey for a moment, but the enchanting woman just brought her hand to one ear and gave an apologetic smile.

“Ah, my apologies. The next customers seem to be approaching. Please continue onward.”

Either she had an exceedingly great sense of hearing, or she had gotten a signal from Zan or one of the others. But at any rate, we hurried up and left.

Awaiting us was another passageway between inner curtains, but this time it didn’t go straight, instead winding its way forward.

“All right, next up will finally be that one-armed fellow! I can’t wait to see what he’s gonna have to show us!” Dan Rutim said cheerfully as he and Ludo Ruu walked up front with the young girls.

But then, a woman’s voice let slip an accusatory, “My!” from behind me.

“What is it? It’s not often I hear you use a tone like that, Ama Min Rutim,” I said.

“Ah, my apologies, Asuta... But Gazraan is being such a spoilsport,” Ama Min Rutim replied, shooting her husband a glare and then bringing her face close to mine. This was all really unlike her. She lowered her voice so that only I could hear and whispered, “Gazraan said that the previous trick might have been done by having some sort of signals coming from the woman playing the flute in the back...”

“Oh. I could see that. But what’s so bad about him saying so?”

“I mean, hearing something like that undercuts all the surprise and wonder, doesn’t it? If I was going to realize that, I’d like to at least do it on my own,” she answered, sounding quite irritated. She must have lost her composure, as she didn’t seem to realize she was doing the same thing to me that Gazraan Rutim

had done to her. I looked over at the young Rutim clan head, and he gave me a troubled smile.

“My apologies for being so careless. Please don’t be mad, Ama Min.”

“Don’t talk to me,” Ama Min Rutim retorted, her short hair bobbing as she turned away. Still, I knew they were a happily married couple, so I found even that to be pretty charming.



Besides, we don't know for sure. I mean, what about when Amin shouted out in pain after Jiza Ruu grabbed Arun's shoulder... That trick doesn't seem like it would work unless both Nachara and Amin had reflexes on the level of hunters from the forest's edge. And so, my enjoyment hadn't really been undercut at all. Just like how Gamley manipulated flames, even if it was some sort of trick, that didn't negate the wonder and awe that the performance could inspire.

Eventually, we reached another hanging curtain at the end of the winding path and opened it, at which point an eerie voice that most of us recognized from a few days ago greeted us from overhead.

"The Gamley Troupe...welcomes you... I am...Zetta..." That muffled, difficult-to-understand voice belonged to the beastman, Zetta. "I will guide you to...our leader, Gamley... Please, come this way..."

There was a rustling in the thicket as a black figure moved through the treetops overhead. I would occasionally spot glints of golden light reflecting off his eyes. There was definitely something animalistic about the way they flashed at us.

"I see. He certainly does have a beastly appearance, though I would say he feels somewhat more human than the savages of Morga," Jiza Ruu whispered to no one in particular. I thought I remembered someone else saying something similar last time around.

At any rate, this time we managed to make our way down the path without being attacked by any outlaws. After walking around five or six meters, Zetta's voice called down to us, "There is a hidden entrance there... Watch your step..."

We had only gone about halfway down the path. However, looking carefully, I spied a hanging curtain off to the left. We must have arrived at this point from the opposite direction last time. Gamley had probably come out from here when those bandits attacked us.

Dan Rutim pulled back the curtain without the slightest hesitation, revealing a natural open space. It was designed like the room where Rolo the knight king and Doga the strongman had clashed, with only the curtain in front of us being visible, while there was just darkness to the left and right. There were also fewer lanterns than on the path that led here or in the previous rooms, making

for an even denser darkness.

Suddenly, a red figure emerged from the hanging curtain ahead of us.

“The Gamley Troupe welcomes you! This shall be the night’s final curtain!”

Gamley casually strode out into the center of the space. I wasn’t sure if he had noticed who we were or not.

This was now my third time seeing him. He had a red cloth wrapped around his head and wore a long jaunty red coat, making him look kind of like a pirate, all the more so because he only had one arm and one eye.

“You aren’t in any danger at all, so please, enjoy the show... Allow me to begin by making some flaming flowers bloom in the air.”

That was a really good summation of the fiery show Gamley was about to put on for us.

There really were red, blue, and green flowers blooming in the dark. Flames raced across the ground, then when they reached their destination they burst forth into brilliant fireworks with a pop. The same techniques that had taken down those bandits were now being used in an actual performance before our very eyes.

Gamley thrust his arm up over his head and flames in three different colors took the shapes of butterflies fluttering up toward the ceiling. When he ran his fingertips through the air, they left an afterimage of burning trails behind them, forming what looked like strange shapes and letters. Was he really using gunpowder or oil to perform these feats? Honestly, I hadn’t even seen gunpowder yet in this world to begin with. Even if it did exist, it surely hadn’t spread all that far and wide. I couldn’t help but find it absolutely ludicrous that someone would create such a compound just for a show and then be able to practice with it enough to become as skilled as Gamley was.

I suppose that’s what makes it such a spectacle.

While the acts that the twins and Dilo the jar man had put on all felt like they could be pulled off with a bit of trickery, I didn’t really know how they were actually done. Arun and Amin could genuinely be children who were split apart from one another using magic. Or maybe Dilo wasn’t dislocating his joints, but

using magic to shrink instead. Zetta could be some otherworldly beast, and Pino could be an immortal who never aged... They were living in that space between dreams and reality.

Though I felt a little bad for Gazraan Rutim, it really did seem rude of him to expose their secrets like that. It was fine to just take in the experience of watching their mysterious acts with nothing more than a sense of pure wonder. Back in my home world, science and the laws of physics had become so all-encompassing that there wasn't much room left for appreciating mysteries like these, which made the world a duller place to live in.

"Well then, this shall be my final trick." Gamley tore off his eye patch, revealing the crimson stone sparkling like an inferno in his left eye socket. "Vairus, god of fire, grant just a single droplet of your blessing upon your faithful child."

After reciting the same chant he had used before wiping out those bandits, Gamley made a sweeping motion with the hem of his red coat, sending red, blue, and green flames whirling through the air at incredible speeds. With the flames racing about and scorching the air, dyeing the world in beautiful color, it was as if three dragons of different colors had grown entangled with each other.

Then, finally, with a violent exploding sound, the flaming dragons burst apart and dispersed. The sparks fluttered to the ground like snow, and once the last of them had vanished, we broke out in a huge round of applause.

Jiza Ruu and Ai Fa had brought their hands up to their mouths and knitted their brows, but all of the other hunters applauded, with Dan Rutim and Giran Ririn cheering loudly. That was proof of just how amazing Gamley's performance truly was.

"I am deeply grateful to you all for coming all the way here to our tent tonight. The path back to the waking world lies that way," Gamley said, getting down on one knee and affectedly pointing at the darkness off to the right. Despite putting on such an incredible show, he didn't seem to be interested in receiving any coins.

With the afterimages from the flames still in our eyes, the trail through the

thicket felt even darker as we walked along it. The path was lined with straw ropes, and took one right turn before bringing us to a leather tent wall. Rather than an inner curtain, though, it was the exit back to the outside world.

As soon as we took a single step outside, the heat and commotion from the bustling traffic immediately assailed my senses. Despite having no more than a single leather curtain separating them, they really did feel like different worlds entirely.

“Now, that was an interesting show! I can’t help but wonder if I should have paid them more!” Dan Rutim remarked with a hearty laugh.

However, Jiza Ruu was cocking his head to one side. “Oh? But that black ape never showed itself. Elder Jiba instructed me to observe it closely...”

“Ah, you’re right! How unfortunate! The ape must have been performing on the path that we didn’t take!” Dan Rutim said.

Rimee Ruu started tugging on Jiza Ruu’s hand. “You should go with us during the day next time, then! The black ape will be there for sure, and Huey and Sara do tricks too!”

Jiza Ruu gave a small sigh, then patted Rimee Ruu on the head. Though I had known them both for quite some time, I had only seen the pair interact on a handful of occasions, but I could tell how much he cared for his younger sister when he made gestures like that.

“Well then, let’s head on back to the forest’s edge! Tonight has been so much fun!” Dan Rutim said energetically as we headed back to the outdoor restaurant, where the rest of our group was waiting. I still felt dizzy from my return to reality, and I knew I was going to have to get some rest back at home or else I might keel over. But at the same time, I kinda wanted to have even more fun, go a little wild, maybe have a bit of fruit wine.

“Hmm. What are you doing here?” Dan Rutim suddenly asked from the head of the group. Ai Fa flinched at the same time next to me.

There was a young man down on one knee in the middle of the stone highway, blocking our path.

“Hold on just a moment, dear friends from the forest’s edge! Would you allow

me to finish off this night with a song?" It was the minstrel, Neeya.

Dan Rutim looked like he was about to say something, but then Jiza Ruu stepped up beside him.

"I'm not certain what your intent is, but we're on our way back to the forest's edge. I ask that you don't get in our way."

"I swear that I will not take much of your time. Please, allow me to make up for the discourtesy I showed earlier in the day," Neeya replied, lifting his head and revealing a deeply pained expression. "I have angered the troupe leader. If I do not receive your forgiveness, I will not be allowed to call myself a member of the Gamley Troupe any longer, so I beg of you..."

"It's not a matter of if we forgive you or not. The biggest issue here is you blocking our path right now."

"No, but..."

Passersby were starting to murmur around us. After all, we had a man from town on bended knee before people of the forest's edge, begging for our forgiveness, right in the middle of traffic. It was the type of situation that people could easily take the wrong way without knowing the circumstances.

"There's no need to make such a big issue out of it... If you understand that you acted rudely, then simply be more careful in the future. As long as you can do that, we will be satisfied."

"But I angered that beautiful woman there, did I not?" Neeya questioned, looking Ai Fa's way with eyes like a puppy stuck out in the rain. Ai Fa glared back at him, looking hellishly displeased.

"If I say that I forgive you, will you leave?"

"First, I would like to perform a song for all of you. That is all that I have to offer, so..."

"Regardless, we're getting in the way of the townsfolk here. Allow us to return to our other comrades over there first," Jiza Ruu stated, cutting Neeya off and walking away. We followed after him, and Neeya trudged along behind us in turn.

“Welcome back, Asuta. Did something happen?” Toor Deen asked.

“Yeah, kinda...”

Since she and the others had been waiting for us in the outdoor restaurant space, we had needed to meet up with them before going home. Tsuvai was slumped over a table, snoring away, while Vina Ruu was dozing next to her. Yamiru Lea, Sufira Zaza, Fei Beim, and the other women were all gathered there too. The hunters guarding them were standing around a short distance away. After quietly saying something to Darmu Ruu from the group of restaurant guards, Jiza Ruu turned back toward Neeya.

“So, what is it that you wish to do?”

“Please listen to just one song. I can earn dozens of coins for my songs, so I hope to atone for my offenses by offering one to you.”

“We wish to return to the forest’s edge as soon as possible... Could this not wait until tomorrow?”

“In that case, I would have nowhere to go for the night...”

I was hesitant to say it out loud, but Neeya’s words and actions felt overly affected to me. He really did seem troubled, and it certainly could be true that he wouldn’t be allowed back in the tent without offering us a song, but his desire to apologize to the people of the forest’s edge likely wasn’t heartfelt. Jiza Ruu and Ai Fa were probably acting so cold because they could see through him too.

“What a pain. If singing for us will make him happy, then why not just go ahead and let him?” Ludo Ruu chimed in, at which point Jiza Ruu seemed to relent and gave a nod.

“Allow me to reemphasize, we wish to return to the forest’s edge as soon as possible. I ask that you keep that fact in mind.”

“Thank you! I shall begin right away!”

Neeya cheerfully pulled his instrument off his back. It was a seven-stringed one, looking like a guitar or mandolin. I had never seen another instrument like it here in Genos. After strumming it a couple times and adjusting the tuning,

Neeya sat down in one of the restaurant seats.

“Well then, please listen to this tale of Misha the White Sage, who brought prosperity to the Eastern Kingdom of Sym.”

With that, he started playing an arpeggio that resounded through the nighttime air of the post town. His instrument definitely sounded like an acoustic guitar, but I got the feeling that the musical theory that underpinned his song was different somehow from what I was familiar with back in my home country. With my shallow knowledge on the subject, the best way I could have described it would've been to say that it sounded somewhat Arabian, but whatever you called it, it definitely sounded foreign to me.

Neeya's voice gently overlapped with the strumming. He sang in a carefree, springy tone that differed completely from how he usually spoke. It was delicate and beautiful, sounding almost androgynous. He wasn't raising his voice to be all that loud, and yet it still seemed to leisurely drift through the air without being overcome by the commotion of the town.

There were even passersby stopping and gathering around the restaurant. His singing was just that good.

I can see how he makes a living with just his voice. It's hard to believe that this is the same rude guy from before.

He actually did have a fairly well-proportioned face, now that I was taking a moment to look at it. When he closed his eyes and strummed on those seven strings while singing in that strange voice, he looked like something out of a picture scroll. The idea of him leaving noblewomen in the castle town spellbound made a lot more sense to me now.

The contents of his song were whimsically beautiful as well. It was a tale of how Misha the White Sage brought unprecedented prosperity to the Kingdom of Sym.

There were seven tribes in Sym, and the story was set in the territory of one of them—the Rao. Several hundred years back, the Rao had been on the verge of dying out. They had been at war with both the people of the mountains and the people of the sea, who were known throughout Sym for their especially violent natures, and had been driven from the fertile plains as a result. Having

been pushed to the far reaches of the eastern territory, where there was nothing but mud, swamps, and barren land, the Rao had seemed to have no choice but to surrender to another tribe or be destroyed. But in the midst of that hopeless situation, a sorcerer who would eventually come to be known as Misha the White Sage had appeared before the chief of the Rao and rescued them from their predicament, and then they had gone on to conquer all of Sym. That was the topic of Neeya's epic ballad.

The sorcerer Misha had white skin and golden hair despite being a citizen of Sym, and used countless magics to assist the Rao in ways such as making sturdy bricks from mud and then using them to build walls and castles that stopped the Rao's enemies in their tracks whenever they tried to attack. The sage also devised powerful weapons made of stone and wood to defeat the tribe's foes. Battle after battle raged for a hundred days, and in the end, the Rao achieved a lasting peace and tremendous prosperity, all thanks to Misha.

They then went on to conquer all of Sym, and with the seven warring factions of the east united into a single country, the chief of the Rao was able to name himself king.

The newly enthroned king then made Misha his chancellor. Using this new power, Misha continued to enrich the kingdom more and more. However, as Misha's glory grew ever greater, a rift started to form between the sage and the king, which was only exacerbated when Misha fell in love with the king's daughter.

Naturally, the king was strongly opposed to giving his precious daughter over to a sorcerer of unknown origin. He forced the two lovers apart, and Misha was eventually exiled from Sym.

Even so, Misha didn't hold a grudge against the people of Sym as he left the nation's lands and disappeared. In her grief, the daughter became a nun and sequestered herself in a stone tower Misha had built, leaving the king to lament his own shortsightedness. Misha never returned, and the king's daughter never left the tower again for as long as she lived.

That was the end of the tale.

The part about bringing prosperity with magic was bright and cheerful,

repelling the invaders felt stirring and heroic, the bit about the king's daughter was sweet and romantic, and the farewell scene was sad and beautiful... By changing the tone of his voice and music, the song never started to feel stale despite going on for over five minutes. When Neeya closed his mouth and his smooth fingers strummed the last note, a generous explosion of applause burst forth from the crowd gathered around.

"That was an amazing song!"

"Play another one, mister!"

The men were calling out stuff like that, while some of the women were gently wiping away their tears. Even as someone with little knowledge of music, I had no doubt that Neeya was an excellent singer.

"That was the tale of Misha the White Sage... Did that serve to at least somewhat soothe your anger?" Neeya asked us, paying no heed to the cheers or half coins being tossed his way. It seemed that even as the singer, he had gotten rather absorbed in the act. His gaze was a bit unfocused, and his expression seemed somehow dimmed.

"Hmm. It certainly was a splendid song. Every bit as fine as the acts your comrades put on over in the tent," Dan Rutim remarked as he stroked his mustache. "Now, Misha was a man, right? Based on his name, I thought he was a woman, so I was a little confused when he fell in love with the princess of Sym."

"Names differ in other nations," Neeya murmured back with a faint smile. "Furthermore, Misha was only his common name. Since his true name was long and complicated, he chose to shorten it."

"Hmm? But doesn't everyone from Sym have a long name?" Dan Rutim asked, turning toward Vina Ruu. However, the eldest Ruu daughter just sulked rather than replying. As he glanced over the two of them, Neeya gave another faint smile.

"Misha was not from Sym. Folklore says he might have wandered there from Mahyudra, but nothing is certain." With a strange light in his pale eyes, Neeya suddenly started staring at me. "According to another legend, Misha was said to be a starless one." I felt a heavy lump in my chest when I heard those words.

“His true name was Mikhail Volkonsky... No one from the four great kingdoms possesses such a strange name. Apparently, he was not a child of the four great gods at all, instead coming from a far-off land.”

I was left dumbstruck.

“I hear tell that you are a starless one as well, Asuta of the Fa clan. Old man Rai, the fortuneteller, said so... He cannot see with his own eyes, but in exchange he can see the stars of others. And yet, he simply couldn’t sense your presence at all.” At that point, Ai Fa pushed me aside and stepped in front of Neeya. He just offered her a vacant smile. “I chose that song for your precious clan member, oh beautiful one... Will you forgive my crime now?”

“Disappear,” was all Ai Fa shot back with.

Neeya gave a bow with his smile still in place, then slung his instrument over his right shoulder. A young girl who had gathered up the half coins that had fallen to the ground handed them to him. He grinned at her and said, “Thank you. Well then, allow me to excuse myself... If you wish to hear my singing again, please come over to our tent. I will offer one more song to the sun god before it is time for sleep.”

With that, Neeya disappeared with a large crowd trailing after him, leaving behind an oppressive silence.

Ai Fa brought her face close to mine and said, “Asuta, are you...”

“I’m fine. No need to worry,” I replied with a nod, then forced a smile. “It was just a bit... No, it was a huge surprise. I let myself get all shaken up over someone from hundreds of years ago. I don’t even know if that Misha guy really was a starless one...or what that even means for us in the first place.”

Ai Fa silently moved even closer. She stared into my eyes, probably trying to confirm whether or not I was lying.

“I mean, what does it really matter? It’s not like the people of the forest’s edge would ever exile me, right?”

“Of course not,” Ai Fa angrily replied, poking me in the chest. Then she heaved a sigh and stepped away from me. “I never cared in the first place. As long as you aren’t upset, then it’s fine.”

“I can’t say that I’m not a little unsettled, but I don’t really have time for that. Right now, I’m mostly thinking about how we need to hurry home to prepare for tomorrow.”

At the forest’s edge, it was considered a crime to lie, so I was very earnest about how I felt.

Having quietly observed our exchange, Jiza Ruu said, “Very well. Are you done talking? In that case, we will return to the forest’s edge. Make sure not to let your guard down until we get there.”

“Right!” Dan Rutim replied, and the women headed toward the wagons and stalls.

As for me, I sent Ai Fa another smile. She had a rather sour look on her face and just poked me in the chest again.

I wasn’t going to let something like this throw me for a loop. After all, we were in the middle of an important job right now. If Misha the White Sage brought prosperity to Sym, then I wanted to do the same for the forest’s edge. If I had one takeaway from Neeya’s ballad, that was it.

As I walked along, I looked upward and saw a sky full of shining stars. Even if my destiny wasn’t written there, my feet were firmly planted here on the ground, alongside my cherished comrades.

I had no choice but to live the life that was in front of me, but I was deeply grateful for the fact that this second chance I had been granted was such a happy existence. That was what I truly felt deep inside, and I would never be ashamed of that.

With that, the day of the sun’s peak finally came to a close, and the sun god’s revival festival finally passed its halfway point.

Chapter 3: The Castle Town and the Revival Festival

1

Two days after the day of the sun's peak, on the twenty-ninth of the violet month, we were to head to the castle town in accordance with Duke Marstein Genos's request.

As it was the seventh day of the ten-day-long revival festival, the end of this huge event was finally in sight. It was a significant burden to take on another job in the middle of everything else that was going on, but the people of the forest's edge were a sturdy lot. No one complained about it among either the chefs or our guards.

As for our business, it went unbelievably smoothly. Both yesterday and today, all the food we had prepared sold out, and there hadn't really been any noteworthy incidents after that bandit attack in the Gamley Troupe's tent on the first night. The townsfolk were clearly enjoying the festival immensely, and that enthusiasm seemed to have spread to the people of the forest's edge as well. Since we'd even had Granny Jiba visiting the post town and the Daleim lands, it felt like this had been hugely important for letting the peoples of Genos and the forest's edge interact.

I hoped that our upcoming trip would help to strengthen that bond as well. Sufira Zaza and Dari Sauti would be joining us, having been added to our group at the last minute, though I had no real idea about whether they felt the same way I did. Of course, the reason the two of them were coming along was not to work as chefs or guards, but just to observe as members of the other two leading clans.

"Things are finally settling down again at the Sauti settlement. Though it is belated, I would like to take the opportunity to observe the actions of the Fa and Ruu now," Dari Sauti said when we reunited for the first time in a while. His left arm was still in a sling from a fracture, but his other injuries all seemed to

have healed up, and his expression looked just as stalwart and composed as it used to.

“There is also a need for the Zaza clan to get a proper grasp of what sort of bonds you’re forging with the nobles of the castle town. I shall act as the leading clan head Gulaf’s eyes, and carefully watch over the proceedings,” Sufira Zaza said. She, in contrast to Dari Sauti, had a really strict expression on her face, as she usually did, showing her strong dedication to her duty.

At any rate, we welcomed both of them with open arms and easily received the approval of the castle as well. In fact, they asked to seat Dari Sauti similarly to how they would a noble visitor, as he was one of the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge.

As for the nobles who would be attending, there were going to be a full fifteen of them in total, with the guest list including certain key individuals from the welcome party we had cooked for a while ago, as well as some from the tea party. From what I had been told, I had thought that this was supposed to be a very private event, but, well, maybe for the folks in the castle town, a gathering of this size was what passed as small-scale in their minds.

The people of the forest’s edge who were going to be there included six chefs, two observers, and eight bodyguards for a total of sixteen. The chefs were Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, Lala Ruu, Toor Deen, Yun Sudra, and me. As mentioned before, the observers were Dari Sauti and Sufira Zaza. And lastly, the hunters were another distinguished group including Ai Fa, Jiza Ruu, Darmu Ruu, Ludo Ruu, Gazraan Rutim, Dan Rutim, Giran Ririn, and a Sauti man.

Shin Ruu would also be accompanying us to take part in the contest of swordsmanship that Leeheim had proposed.

Despite having been invited to such an event, Shin Ruu looked just as calm and self-possessed as always. He didn’t seem concerned at all, even though there were a pair of noble ladies who had requested his presence. I had to wonder if Lala Ruu had spoken to him about that. When I stealthily asked how he was feeling, he quietly replied, “I simply need to show them my skills and not bring shame upon myself as a hunter of the forest’s edge.”

For the food sampling part of the event, three chefs from the castle town

would also be participating: Varkas, Timalo, and Yang. We would all be unveiling the recipes we had come up with to use the black fuwano flour, white mamaria vinegar, and white mamaria wine from Banarm. The majority of us chefs from the forest's edge were really looking forward to seeing what Varkas had created in particular.

“Personally, just the thought of going to the castle town is kind of overwhelming for me,” Yun Sudra said excitedly as the totos carriage we were riding in passed through the castle gates and brought the townscape into view through the window. “It’s not just the road. Even the buildings are made from stone. It’s almost unbelievable that such a sight could be real.”

“That’s true. No matter how many times I come here, I just can’t seem to get used to it.”

After we finished our preparations for tomorrow, we headed out from the settlement at the forest's edge at the lower fourth hour. Sunset hadn't quite rolled around just yet, so it was one of those in-between times of day, but there still seemed to be a large number of people enjoying the revival festival throughout the castle town.

There were always a lot of people walking along the stone streets to begin with, but now the crowds were even bigger than usual. There were people singing, dancing, carrying flutes and drums, drinking fruit wine in the middle of the day... It was all pretty similar to how things were in the post town in terms of liveliness.

“Unsurprisingly, I don’t see any outlaws about,” Jiza Ruu, who was also visiting the castle town for the first time, remarked. As you needed a pass to set foot in the castle town in the first place, it was only natural that there weren’t any ruffians or criminals to be found. Dabagg was a lot more peaceful than the Genos post town too, but the fence they had around their town was nothing compared to the castle town walls, so naturally this place was even safer.

Even so, aside from that, everything else was basically the same here as it was in the post town. Just among the folks I knew, the bodyguards Kamyua Yoshu and Zasshuma, the merchants Shumiral and Diel, and the minstrel Neeya were all able to freely come and go. Along the path we were on now, which led from

the gates to a nearby city plaza, I happened to notice quite a few people dressed in a familiar way for travel, as well as lots of totos pulling wagons.

The totos carriage we were riding in kept swaying for a long while after that until eventually arriving at the familiar Turan manor...though, as it was currently being used as a venue for entertaining noble visitors, perhaps it was best referred to as the former Turan manor instead.

“We have been waiting for you, guests from the forest’s edge. Please, come this way.”

As we passed through the entrance to the building, which was flanked by guards, we were greeted by pages in yellow uniforms. Since this was no longer the Turan manor, Chiffon Chel wasn’t present to act as our guide. From what I’d heard, she had been moved to a residence near the castle with Torst and her mistress, Lefreya. I had asked Yang to send her a message through Polarth regarding her older brother Eleo Chel, but I had no way of knowing at present if it had been properly conveyed.

“Allow us to first show you to the bathhouse.”

With that, we started walking down the carpeted hallways under the guidance of the pages. They really must have been well trained, as they didn’t look shaken in the least, despite having been met with so many hunters. Once we had arrived at our destination and handed over all of the luggage we had brought along to some assistant pages, we were shown into the brick-built bathhouse for the first time in roughly fifty days.

“Chefs, Sir Shin Ruu, and all who will be entering the kitchen or the same space as our noble visitors, please cleanse yourselves here,” one of the pages explained.

“Hmm,” Jiza Ruu hummed. “You say that we need to cleanse ourselves not only if we are heading to the kitchen, but also if we are entering the dining hall?”

“Yes, those are the duke’s instructions.”

“Hmm... We weren’t told that before, though. Wonder if some noble complained or something,” Ludo Ruu muttered, to which the page deeply

bowed his head.

“This building only just recently became a venue for entertaining noble visitors, so a number of customs have been revised. We ask that you please understand.”

“We have no intention of ignoring your customs, but we haven’t been told yet how many of us will be permitted to enter the dining hall as bodyguards. I suppose to avoid a hassle later, it would be best for all of us to cleanse ourselves,” Jiza Ruu said.

And so, every last one of the men present ended up bathing. Of course, not counting myself, all eight of them were hunters. It was quite a sight, like that time when I had encountered Jiza and Darmu Ruu while bathing a good while back.

“Ooh, how strange! I feel as if I’m giba meat being cooked over a flame!” a naked Dan Rutim chuckled in the bathhouse, which was filled with thick steam. No matter where I looked, I was surrounded by dark-skinned musculature, which I didn’t know how to feel about.

Among this group, only Jiza Ruu and Giran Ririn were visiting the castle town for the first time. Of course, neither of them were the type to allow themselves to look shaken or uneasy, no matter the situation, but Giran Ririn had appeared to be enjoying himself right from the very start.

After that, the women cleansed themselves too, and then some of our members split off. Specifically, Shin Ruu, who had been challenged to a contest, and Dari Sauti, who had been invited to sit alongside the nobles, as well as the man assigned to guard him.

Lala Ruu had been restraining her emotions all this time, but now she finally blurted out, “Shin Ruu! Um...good luck?”

“Right,” he nodded back, and after a long look at Lala Ruu’s face, he walked off with the page who was acting as his guide.

Lala Ruu had said she was sure Shin Ruu would win the contest against the noble and that she wasn’t concerned in the least, but she must have been feeling uneasy now that the time was fast approaching. I could see the

helplessness in her eyes as she watched his slender figure walk away.

After saying farewell to Dari Sauti's group too, we were left with fourteen members in our party. We quietly headed to the kitchens and were shown into the large one adjacent to the massive pantry. As soon as we opened the door, all sorts of aromas hit us. It seemed the chefs from the castle town had already begun their preparations.

As it was their first time here, Lala Ruu, Yun Sudra, and Sufira Zaza were glancing around with looks of astonishment and admiration. When I tried to eyeball the size of the kitchen, I figured it was around fifteen meters squared—roughly twice the dimensions of a classroom, or half as large as a gymnasium—so that was a pretty natural reaction.

The number of workstations arranged in lines around the room had to be in the double digits, with three groups currently working at several of them. The ceiling was high and a number of windows here and there provided ventilation and natural light, but it was still rather hot.

“Hmm. It certainly is a wide space. Very well, we will have Darmu and Giran Ririn keep watch outside the door.”

On Jiza Ruu's orders, the two specified individuals remained outside while everyone else stepped into the room. Yang was working hard at the nearest station, and he greeted us first.

“It's been some time, Sir Asuta, and all of the rest of you from the forest's edge... Ah, and you too, Lady Toor Deen.”

“Ah, um, yes. I-It's been a while...”

Having been suddenly called out, Toor Deen gave a flustered bow of her head. At the tea party, she was the one who had been singled out for making the most excellent sweet. Yang must have made a point of remembering her name after that.

“Thank you for coming here today. I am greatly looking forward to the taste testing. Have you already heard how it is to take place?”

“Yes. From what I was told, we're to sample the dishes in the same room as the noble visitors,” I said.

“That is correct. Then we chefs will share our opinions and discuss how best to make use of the ingredients from Banarm,” Yang stated, his gaze turning toward Toor Deen. “However, I was unable to prepare anything but a sweet. Will you be making a sweet today as well, Lady Toor Deen?”

“N-No, I’m just here to help Asuta today... I-I didn’t have enough time to learn how to handle black fuwano...”

“That is certainly a shame. I’ve been wondering what sort of sweet you might make with it while I’ve been working on this job.”

“I-I’m also looking forward to trying your sweet today,” Toor Deen replied, her face now bright red.

Yang smiled somewhat bashfully back at her. “I’m honored. I ask that when the time for taste testing comes, you give your earnest opinion.”

“Y-Yes, of course!”



At that point, a new person approached. He was a thin chef dressed in white, with a belly that jutted out. He had a smooth, healthy-looking face, and at a guess I would've said he was in his forties. It was Timalo, the head chef of Selva's Spear, and this was the first time I'd seen him in around four months.

"It has been some time, Sir Asuta. I am glad to find you looking well."

"Yeah, it's really been a while, Timalo. Have you been doing well too?"

"Yes, of course," Timalo replied with a kind smile. At least on the surface, he appeared quite pleasant and gentlemanly. Though he had been badly shaken by the way Marstein had raked him over the coals the last time we met, he wasn't letting that show at all. "I ask that you go easy on me today... You have certainly brought quite a large crowd with you this time."

"Yeah, that's because we have a lot of different dishes to make. We're gonna have to hurry if we want to get them all ready in time."

"Oh? May I ask how many dishes you plan to serve?"

"Huh? Let's see... I guess overall I'd say roughly six."

"Six dishes?! That's quite a number!" Timalo remarked with his arms flung open wide in a shocked pose.

It certainly must have seemed like quite a few, but really, the main dishes were the dipping soba I was making and the giba meat and white mamaria wine stew from the Ruu clan. Then, in order to show off the mayonnaise and dressing I'd come up with using white mamaria vinegar, I was planning to make a salad, which would work out to six dishes in total.

"Even I was only able to make three dishes, so this is most definitely a surprise."

"Right, but the important thing is the quality of the dishes, not the quantity."

"Quite right. In fact, I have heard that the foremost chef in Genos, Sir Varkas, only created a single dish." As he said that, Timalo glanced behind me with a tenacious look in his eyes, at the workstation where four chefs clad in white from head to toe were busily working away—Varkas and his three apprentices. "It has reached my ears that you have manned the kitchen alongside Sir Varkas

before, Sir Asuta...”

“Ah, yes. At the welcome party for the envoys from Banarm.”

“And I was told your cooking was commended by roughly half of those present. When I heard that, I was so frustrated that I couldn’t stop myself from grinding my teeth.”

“Oh, that wasn’t a taste competition or anything, so...”

“Sir Varkas is indeed the foremost chef here in Genos. No one knows that fact better than I do,” Timalo interrupted. “I am certain he is once again preparing a dish that will fully live up to his reputation. It makes me eager to put my skills to good use as well.”

In the past, Varkas had served as the head chef for the Turan manor, while Timalo was the assistant head chef. I was a bit worried that the man might have held some ill will toward the people of the forest’s edge and me, but rather than that, it seemed he was completely fixated on Varkas.

“The kitchen of Selva’s Spear has been placed in my charge. Though Sir Varkas’s Silver Star has earned quite a reputation as well, I cannot allow him to get the better of me... At any rate, I still have work to take care of, so please excuse me.”

“Ah, right. See you later.”

After saying what he had wanted to and nothing more, Timalo returned to his workstation. As she watched him walk away, Reina Ruu said to me, “Asuta... That man’s personality seems to be the same as always, but he isn’t hiding his mouth with a white cloth, is he?”

“A white cloth?”

I thought back to when I’d first met Timalo. He’d had a white cloth covering his nose and mouth, and Roy had informed me that he’d been wearing it because he didn’t want to breathe the same air as people of low birth. Perhaps his views on the people of the forest’s edge had evolved, or maybe he was just too fixated on Varkas at the moment. But regardless, it wasn’t a bad change for us.

“Oh, it just occurred to me that Roy isn’t here. I guess he wasn’t called on to assist Timalo today,” I remarked.

“Oh, yeah?” Reina Ruu replied with a look of feigned indifference. Seeing her expression, I had to wonder if she had been concerned about possibly running into him here. Personally, my feelings on the matter were somewhat complicated. I was both disappointed and relieved at the same time.

“Well then, why don’t we get to work too? Yang, I’ll see you later.”

“Of course. Excuse me as well.”

Yang would only be making a single sweet, and he was being accompanied by Nicola and one other cooking assistant. Timalo was making three dishes, meanwhile, and had three assistants. In comparison, we had six chefs from the forest’s edge. The giba meat and white mamaria wine stew just needed to be heated back up, so we would just be working on the other five dishes together.

We had roughly an hour and a half to cook. Though we had done as much prep work as we could in advance, we were going to be rather tight on time even so. The luggage we had handed off at the entrance had been delivered to a workstation in the corner, so our next step was to head to the pantry to secure the rest of the ingredients we needed.

As we walked over that way, one of the chefs clad in white working at a station farther from the entrance than ours turned toward us with mechanical precision. Sparkling green eyes shined through the holes in his mask. He was slender and tall, but wasn’t as big as Bozl. It was undoubtedly Varkas himself.

“Hello there, Sir Asuta. It has been far too long.”

“It really has, Varkas. I look forward to working alongside you today.”

“As do I. Hold on for just a moment...” Varkas said, before stepping away to wash his hands in a water jug. Then he thoroughly wiped them off with a white hand cloth and walked over to me again before firmly grasping my hands. “Sir Asuta, I was truly impressed by your dish from the other day.”

“Ah, you mean the giba curry that Bozl brought back from the post town, right? I’m honored to hear that you ate it, Varkas.”

With his hands still gripping mine, Varkas brought his piercing green eyes closer. “It seems that I have been underestimating your skills more than I had previously thought. To think that you could handle herbs so splendidly at such a young age... Will you be making that fantastic dish again today?”

“Ah, no, since it doesn’t use any ingredients from Banarm...”

“That is a shame... Truly, a shame. All this time, I have been hoping to experience that dish prepared with the greatest of ingredients available here in this pantry.”

Varkas was always expressionless and difficult to pin down, but sometimes he would freely let this oddly intense passion shine through. Since he was wearing his mask at the moment, it felt all the more bizarre. Still, feeling grateful for his enthusiastic reaction, I stepped back with a chuckle.

Then, just as she had done in the past, Ai Fa stepped forward and said, “Hey. As I have said before, even amongst men, I cannot approve of more touching than is necessary. If his answer has satisfied your curiosity, then I ask that you hurry up and step away from my clan member.”

“My apologies...” After one last reluctant squeeze, Varkas finally released my hands. Then he looked around at everyone present. “By the way, I heard from Bozl that Sir Mikel’s daughter possesses skill far beyond her very young age. Did she not accompany you today?”

“No. This was a job accepted by us people of the forest’s edge, so she didn’t come with us. If the idea had been to show off recipes using giba meat, though, I definitely would have reached out to her.”

“I see. That’s such a shame. Sir Mikel truly was an outstanding chef, so I am greatly interested in his daughter,” Varkas said, drawing in close again. “Still, I do not often have the opportunity to set foot outside of the castle town. What do you say to the idea that once this revival festival comes to a close, I extend an invitation to the young lady and yourself?”

“Huh? An invitation?”

“A great many peddlers have been visiting Genos for the revival festival. As a result, even though this pantry has been running short of late, it will soon be

receiving a large influx of ingredients. I am certain you will be asked to examine them once again, Sir Asuta. Could I ask you to bring that young woman along when that day arrives?”

It was certainly a unique request. But now that he mentioned it, I had first met Varkas when I had been summoned to the castle town in order to examine ingredients.

“Well, personally, I really appreciate the offer. As long as Myme’s father, Mikel, and the authorities from the castle give their permission, I would definitely like to see it become a reality.”

“The nobles will surely offer no objection. And as for me, my sole wish is to ensure that only chefs with an appropriate level of skill will be allowed to lay their hands on the ingredients delivered here.”

Even though it had been a while since I had last seen Varkas, he really was just the same as always. For some reason, that thought made me happy.

“All right, let me talk to her and Mikel about it. Can I leave Polarth and Duke Genos to you, Varkas?”

“Of course. I shall raise the matter before the end of the day,” Varkas replied with a polite nod, then suddenly turned around, carefully cleansed his hands in the water jug again, and faced his workstation once more. “Well then, I still have work to do, but I shall be eagerly anticipating the taste testing,” he said, his gaze fixed on his ingredients as he spoke.

As I thought to myself about how that was just like him, I nodded back, “Right. Oh, and I’d like to say hi to Bozl too, if you wouldn’t mind. I need to thank him for delivering my cooking to you.”

“Bozl is in the smoking room,” Varkas bluntly stated.

“Huh?” I made a questioning sound with a tilt of my head. When I looked around, I found that sure enough, Bozl’s huge frame was nowhere to be found. Even with all of Varkas’s apprentices hiding their faces under white masks, there wouldn’t be any mistaking him. Varkas was only supposed to have three apprentices, but there were already four people present, including the man himself... Someone else had been added to his group, and I just hadn’t noticed.

The one who was even taller than Varkas and quite thin must have been the older guy with Sym blood, Tatumai. And the little one around Reina Ruu's height was undoubtedly Shilly Rou. The two of them were paying us no heed, being too busy chopping up vegetables, tending to boiling pots, and so on.

The fourth and final member of their group, who I wasn't familiar with, didn't seem to stand out in any particular way, appearing to be just a man with a medium build. He was standing there next to Shilly Rou, staring intently into a boiling pot with a serious bearing.

Hmm. So Varkas had another apprentice?

Well, there was surely going to be a chance for us to get acquainted after we finished our work. Having come to that conclusion, I turned around, only for Reina Ruu to slip by me and walk over to the man in question.

"What exactly are you doing here, assisting Varkas with his work?" she coldly asked, seriously catching me off guard. The masked man with the medium build glanced back at her.

"Don't interrupt. I can't chat while I have a job to do."

When I heard his voice, I was taken aback. After all, it belonged to none other than Roy.

"It was Mikel's cooking that affected you so strongly, wasn't it? So why did you ask to study under Varkas instead?"

"I told you not to interrupt. It has nothing to do with you."

Reina Ruu seemed prepared to argue further. However, a moment later, Jiza Ruu approached her from behind without making a sound and grabbed ahold of her slender shoulders.

"Reina, I do not know what this conversation may be about, but you are the one forgetting your manners."

Reina Ruu bit her lip while glaring at Roy's masked face, but eventually she turned her back on him.

With that little reunion between us chefs over and done with, we finally got to work on the night's cooking.

Roughly an hour and a half later, sunset arrived at the lower sixth hour. Somehow or another, we had managed to prepare all six dishes in time, which we took with us as we headed for the dining hall.

Yang and Timalo were going to be presenting on their own, but Varkas and I brought along all of our cooking assistants as well. Since this was a gathering of nobles, normally it would have been just me and a representative from the Ruu clan who would be attending, but I really wanted everyone to try the cooking prepared by Varkas and the others, so I had asked Polarth in advance for permission to have everyone join in.

Varkas, on the other hand, was able to take his four apprentices in with him like it was nothing, but he must have also made arrangements for that in advance. At any rate, we ended up in a line beside one another in a notably larger dining hall than last time around.

Naturally, Varkas's group had removed their white masks. Varkas was tall and slender with pale skin like a southerner and green eyes, and it was difficult to tell how old he was. Tatumai, meanwhile, was a dark-skinned older gentleman with long black hair, half of which had gone white. Bozl was a large southerner with a disheveled mustache and hair, while Shilly Rou was a girl with a harsh gaze and long brown hair pulled up into a tight bun. Then lastly, you had Roy, a young man with noticeably freckled pale skin who had a medium build and looked displeased.

"Today has certainly been a great undertaking. I am quite glad you were all able to make time for this during the revival festival, when everyone is quite busy," Duke Marstein Genos stated as representative for the nobles. They had quite a crowd on their side, with fifteen of them present. Since we were going to be eating while standing up today, they had all split up into their own groups.

From the house of Genos you had a total of four members: Marstein himself; his first son, Melfried; Melfried's wife, Eulifia; and their daughter, Odifia. The group from Banarm included Welhide—a young black-haired nobleman who was the chief envoy—and two other members. The house of Turan had their nominal head, Lefreya, and her guardian, Torst, present. The house of Daleim

had only sent their second son, Polarth, and likewise, only the first son, Leeheim, was present from the house of Saturas. Then you had Lady Besta from the house of Viscount Talfon, Lady Selanju from the house of Viscount Madel, and two guests of the castle—Diel, the daughter of a metalwork merchant, and Arishuna, the star reader—bringing the total up to fifteen. The group was largely dressed quite well. And there leading clan head Dari Sauti was, standing quietly beside Diel and Arishuna—the only ones who weren't nobles.

The dining hall was grand and circular, with a carpet the color of wine under our feet, beautiful tapestries running along the walls, and even a beautiful glass chandelier hanging from the high ceiling. I couldn't see any guards, but I was certain that there were some around, probably concealed behind the tapestries. There were also a number of waist-high circular tables here and there throughout the room, which also served as a sort of barrier between the nobles and the chefs.

We had been permitted to bring along three guards for ourselves, so we had Ai Fa, Jiza Ruu, and Gazraan Rutim lined up near the door, watching over us.

After glancing over everyone present once again, Marstein said, "Well then, before we enjoy the food that each of these noteworthy chefs have put such effort into, I would like to have Sir Welhide say a word as representative for the envoys. Would that be acceptable?"

"Of course," Welhide replied as he took a step forward, clad in crimson formal attire. "I am truly grateful to Duke Genos for arranging this dinner tonight for our sake. And I am also greatly looking forward to seeing how the famed chefs of Genos used the fuwano and mamaria we are so proud of in their cooking. May the western god bring good fortune to the futures of Genos and Banarm."

The nobles and guests in attendance all politely listened to Welhide's words, though I did spot Diel, clad in her blue dress, winking at me from a good distance away in the middle of his speech.

Lefreya was standing over next to Torst, completely expressionless. She still wasn't permitted to go out in public, but apparently she would sometimes be summoned to appear at events involving Banarm, such as this one. Even if it was under the pretext of atoning for the crimes of the previous head of the

house of Turan, it still made me glad that she would be able to eat my cooking.

“Well then, shall we start the taste testing? As a bit of added entertainment, I would like to have the chefs who made these dishes remain here and speak about the fuwano and mamaria from Banarm.”

On Marstein’s signal, the pages started rolling out some tea carts. It turned out to be one of my own dishes that was distributed to the various tables first.

“We shall begin with a dish from Asuta of the forest’s edge... Actually, it seems this is only his first dish, and we can expect more from him.”

“Yes, first we have the dish I made that uses black fuwano. Specifically, it’s a dish called soba, which contains black fuwano and poitan.”

This was the dipping soba I had tested out during that one study session at the Ruu house when Dora had visited. I had mixed together the black fuwano and poitan in a ratio of four to one, making a handmade gray-brown soba. For the soup base, I’d made a stock from dried fish and seaweed, then paired it with tau oil, sugar, and red mamaria wine. The basic recipe was something I had already perfected quite a while back.

However, it hadn’t been received quite as favorably as the pasta. That made sense, though, as they always ate meat, vegetables, and grains together in Genos, so they seemed to have trouble judging the soba on its own. Unlike the okonomiyaki, carbonara, or pasta with meat sauce, which all included both meat and vegetables, the soba had to be eaten on its own, which made it difficult for them to see it as a complete dish.

For that reason, I had also prepared a side dish for today—a variety of tempura, which took approximately as long to prepare as the handmade soba.

“Hmm. It seems your specialty truly is fried dishes, Sir Asuta,” Welhide happily remarked with a smile. “From what I am told, fried foods have fallen out of fashion in Genos, but that is not the case in Banarm. The meal you prepared before was truly delicious, and I am very much looking forward to trying this black fuwano dish.”

“Thank you. I hope that it is to your taste.”

I had prepared as many different varieties of tempura as I could think of. The

vegetables I had fried included some yam-like gigo and zucchini-like chan sliced into rounds, daikon-like sheema cut into quarters, bamboo shoot-like chamcham cut into wedges, and finely chopped onion-like aria and carrot-like nenon. Then, since I had wanted to add a bit of green to the dish, I'd also prepared some green pepper-like pula and spinach-like nanaar.

I'd also chosen the shiitake and common mushroom substitutes from Jagar for the tempura, as well as the char-esque freshwater fish known as a rillione. On top of that, I'd rehydrated and used some dried maroll, which were like big sweet shrimp. Since they had been dried out, I hadn't initially expected to get the same amount of flavor from them as shrimp tempura would normally have, but they hadn't turned out half bad.

Of course, it would have been a big disappointment if I hadn't found a way to use my main ingredient, giba meat, so I made two versions using it. I cut several pieces of rib meat into thin slices and wrapped them around some tarapa or gyama dried milk, creating an Italian-style tempura. Of course, for the tarapa, I used the strongly sweet ones kept in the pantry here.



I had used white fuwano flour for the coating, and I thought they came out looking just as good as the giba cutlets. First I had beaten some kimyuus egg together with water, then I added a small amount of white mamaria vinegar, before mixing in the flour to make a coarse blend. Stirring it up until it was too smooth would have made it stickier than desired, so I had stopped once it had been reduced to being just slightly lumpy. It was the opposite approach from the one needed for making pasta and udon, where I kneaded the dough as thoroughly as possible. The vinegar was meant to reduce the viscosity, by the way. To make the coating good and crunchy, that part was key.

The purpose of the egg was to fluff up the coating. Some places supposedly used baking powder, but at the Tsurumi Restaurant, we just used egg. And I used the whole egg rather than just the yolk as that created a firmer coating that retained its texture longer.

After having coated the ingredients, I fried them at a high temperature. I had used a large pot and a great deal of oil, just like how I did with the cutlets. That allowed them to take on a crunchy, pleasant texture.

Furthermore, I had also made garnishes for the soup by grating daikon-like sheema and yam-like gigo, roughly chopping up pickled plum-like dried kiki, and mincing fresh garlic chive-like pepe leaves, providing four different varieties. I couldn't make a complete spread of them without any substitutes for green onions or wasabi, but I had at least wanted to do this much.

"Hmm. Even setting the fried dish aside, this black fuwano dish certainly is mysterious. Even if it does look similar to that pasta dish we were served last time..." a mild-looking older member of the envoy group remarked.

"Right. Just like with the pasta, this is eaten using a three-pronged skewer. You wrap a bite around the tines, steep it in the soup, and then eat it."

I was really grateful that the castle town had a type of utensil that was the equivalent of a fork. A few of the noblewomen had no experience with pasta, so Welhide took it upon himself to offer them a personal explanation.

"Hmm. This is every bit as good as the pasta!" a different member of the envoy group who was a little on the plump side remarked. "The broth has a somewhat strong flavor, but eating it together with this fried dish makes it all

even tastier. And this rillione fish is superb as well!”

“It’s true that the soup’s flavor is on the stronger side, so feel free to make adjustments to match your tastes. Those who don’t enjoy powerful flavors as much should be fine just dipping the soba in lightly. And if you add some grated sheema, that should do a good job of mellowing it out.”

“With this meat and these vegetables, we’re only missing a separate soup dish for a fine dinner. It feels like such a shame to only be able to enjoy one bite,” Welhide stated, and the rest of the envoy group seemed to be largely satisfied as well. From my perspective, seeing nobles in such gorgeous attire standing around eating dipping soba was quite a sight.

And then, the sound of noodles being slurped up filled the air. It came from the chefs’ table rather than the nobles, though. Looking that way, I saw Varkas’s apprentice Tatumai enjoying some soba.

“My apologies. In Sym, there is a dish called shaska that is eaten in this manner.”

“Hmm. That’s quite a sound, but is there some reason for eating it that way?”

“Yes. With both shaska and this dish, by sucking in air along with the food itself, you can enjoy a more abundant flavor. If you just ball it up and put it in your mouth directly, the effort that went into making the noodles so thin will go to waste.”

After hearing that, the nobles began trying to slurp the soba as well. There was a bit of chaos when some of the broth went flying toward the dresses worn by the noblewomen, though.

“I see. So that’s why you kept making that sound when you ate it, Asuta?” Sheera Ruu asked with a deadly serious look on her face as she picked up her own bowl. Of course, she wasn’t able to master the technique instantly, so she ended up just making a cute and awkward slurping noise.

Polarth’s gaze was drawn over to her then, and he remarked, “Oh? Er, you there, you’re eating that dish with wooden skewers? You seem quite skilled at handling them.”

“Yes. I learned how to do so from Asuta.”

Sheera Ruu, Reina Ruu, and Toor Deen were all practicing with chopsticks. Naturally, they didn't have any such things here in the castle town, so the other guests were watching them with great interest.

"As I explained with the pasta, this is a dish from my home country. Back there, pasta was primarily eaten with a pronged utensil without making a sound, but for soba we would typically slurp it up while holding it with these two wooden skewers called chopsticks."

"Your home country... It is an island nation outside of this continent, correct? I thought this about the pasta as well, but it truly is such a strange dish," Eulifia remarked with a smile while looking after little Odifia.

"Right. Back in my home country, we would traditionally eat this dish a lot at the end of the year too. The day of the downfall is still two days away, but it almost feels like fate that I'm introducing this dish now."

"How amusing. You truly are a splendid chef," Eulifia praised, still smiling away. It felt as if she was trying to encourage me, saying that even though I hadn't done very well at the tea party, I had shown my true worth here.

However, from his position between her and Polarth, Leeheim snorted, "Hmph. I didn't exactly request a lecture on how to eat the dish or what utensils to use. Still, I can certainly understand that it is even more difficult to eat than that pasta dish."

Sure enough, that was the approach he was taking again today.

Incidentally, the match between his uncle and Shin Ruu would be held after the taste testing wrapped up.

"It wouldn't do to fill our stomachs entirely with just the first dish, so could we have the next one brought out?" Marstein signaled the pages, not addressing Leeheim's comment at all. With that, a couple dishes that were completely different from the first one were brought out into the space between the tables.

"Ooh, I'm glad to see some hot food!"

"Here we have a giba meat stew containing white mamaria wine, fried freshwater fish made with white mamaria vinegar, and three plates of raw

vegetables, chatchi, and giba meat respectively. The stew with the white mamaria wine was made by Reina and Sheera Ruu.”

The two Ruu chefs had prepared a familiar stew, which was their specialty. They didn’t seem to want to serve this one at the stalls, but they made great use of the white mamaria wine’s sweetness and flavor, and it really had turned out quite well. The stew included aria, chatchi, and nenon, with tau oil, sugar, and white mamaria vinegar serving to flavor the dish.

As for the plates of food cuts I had presented, they were meant to show off the condiments I had created using white mamaria vinegar. That meant tartar sauce for the fried rillione fish, while the salad made with tino, aria, nenon, paprika-like ma pula, and sweet tarapa had mayonnaise and a dressing. I had also thrown together, not a potato salad, but rather a chatchi salad.

Finally, for the giba dish, I had ankake prepared in a Chinese style. After first boiling some sirloin, aria, pula, and tino, and sautéing a bunch of the pseudo-cloud ear mushroom over high heat, I had made a sweet sauce to pour over them, using white mamaria vinegar as the base. Out of all the dishes that used mamaria vinegar directly, this was the one I was most proud of at present.

“Ah, this is delicious,” Yang remarked as he ate some of the sweet vinegar ankake over at the neighboring table. “The sauce more than amply demonstrates the flavor of the white mamaria vinegar, while still keeping its sourness in perfect harmony with its sweetness, making the dish quite easy to eat.”

“It really is good. I’m not usually that fond of mamaria vinegar, but I could eat a ton of this,” Diel agreed from over in the nobles’ seating. She had seemed rather let down at the tea party, so I felt quite relieved to see her bright smile now.

As for Arishuna, she was quietly dining alongside the noblewomen. Her expressions were especially hard to read, even for an easterner, but she seemed to be eating just as much as the men.

“Ah, these vegetables are quite tasty as well. Just sprinkling mamaria vinegar over them wouldn’t be enough to produce such a result.”

“And this chatchi dish has a very subtle flavor to it. Does this one use mamaria

vinegar as well?”

“Mmm. This fish is fantastic!”

The guests of honor from Banarm seemed to be especially enjoying themselves.

Meanwhile, Marstein questioned, “Hmm... So you say this dish was prepared by the daughters of the Ruu clan, Asuta?”

“Ah, yes. It was made by Reina and Sheera Ruu here.”

“Reina and Sheera Ruu...” Marstein quietly repeated, looking the two of them over. “Reina Ruu is the leading clan head Donda Ruu’s daughter, correct? And Sheera Ruu...”

“I belong to a branch house. My father is Ryada Ruu, who is Donda Ruu’s younger brother... I am also Shin Ruu’s older sister.”

“Ah, so you are Shin Ruu’s elder sister? How interesting,” Marstein remarked with a gentle smile, while Sheera Ruu gave a polite bow of her head. He had managed to learn Baadu Fou’s name before I had, so he had surely now committed Sheera Ruu’s name to memory as well. “I hear tell that the girls named Toor Deen and Rimee Ruu also displayed skills that rivaled your own at the tea party the other day, Asuta. You people of the forest’s edge truly are full of surprises.”

“Thank you for saying so...”

“And after this, we will get to observe the fabled strength of a hunter of the forest’s edge. This certainly is proving to be a day full of valuable experiences,” Marstein politely stated.

As the duke was speaking, Leeheim looked away with a grin. At the same time, I spotted Lala Ruu glaring at him from the shadow of her older sister. As retaliation for how Reina Ruu had treated him, Leeheim had summoned Shin Ruu here today. It was no surprise that Lala Ruu would truly hate that noble who had gone after both her sister and the man she cared about.

“These truly are all splendid dishes. I am quite impressed, myself. Both the dishes made with giba meat and the ones without are delicious. I am certain it

is thanks to your outstanding skill, Sir Asuta, that a good number of ingredients have managed to become quite popular in the post town as well,” Torst now chimed in. He was an older noble with a face like a pug. Though his facial expression made him look just as exhausted as always, there was also a stronger shine in his eyes than I had ever seen. “I had planned on thanking you separately, but let me just say that we were able to sell off all the ingredients filling the pantry before they spoiled thanks to the efforts of Sir Yang and yourself. With the herbs, tau oil, and sugar in particular, we will need to order more than before so as not to run short. Thanks to you, though the house of Turan was on the verge of financial collapse, we have finally gotten back on our feet.”

“Ah, I’m glad to hear it.”

“The fuwano and mamaria of Banarm will surely manage to find a market as well. At least, that is how I feel, but what do you all say?”

Those words were directed toward the chefs of the castle town. The intended customer base for the black fuwano and white mamaria was mainly the residents of the castle town, not the post town, after all. I wouldn’t be opening a shop there, so if they didn’t make use of these dishes from here on out, it wouldn’t have the desired impact on sales.

It was Yang who solemnly nodded back in response to Torst’s question.

“I also find Sir Asuta’s dishes simply fantastic. Especially this tartar sauce, mayonnaise, and dressing, which feel like they could be used on other dishes as well for the enjoyment of the residents of the castle town. And you say they could be prepared even by those who are not chefs, correct?”

“Right. In fact, I actually just taught some residents of the Daleim lands I’m acquainted with how to make them the other day.”

“Ah yes, I’ve heard that your people were spending the night in the Daleim lands before the holidays. I would have liked to see that as well, were it possible,” Polarth said, nodding with a smile before Yang continued on.

“And this soba dish using black fuwano is not only delicious but also quite novel, so I would imagine a great many people will eventually come to enjoy it. But if the black fuwano is to be sold in the castle town, that means the chefs

who work there will need to learn how to make it...”

“Right. But anyone who calls themselves a chef shouldn’t have difficulty preparing it. Pasta takes more effort than soba, and some of the others from the forest’s edge, like Toor Deen, can make it on their own.”

Everyone’s gazes shifted over to my side while they murmured in admiration. Naturally, Toor Deen turned bright red and hid behind me.

“Still, are you truly willing to reveal the method to make it to us? The recipe for a delicious dish is like treasure for a chef...” Yang stated, looking a bit troubled.

“Yes,” I nodded back. “If I hadn’t intended on doing so, then there wouldn’t have been any point in showcasing the dish here. It’s not like doing so will hurt me, and besides, it would make me really happy to see a dish from my home country be accepted here in Genos.”

“I have indeed heard that you have been teaching your methods to the owners of other stalls in the post town, Sir Asuta... I am truly in awe of your generosity.”

That just went to show how our values differed. Personally, teaching the women of the forest’s edge how to make delicious food was my starting point, so I had no resistance to the idea of spreading around my recipes.

It feels like far less of a hassle than opening a shop of my own in the castle town. And if soba becomes a commonly eaten dish, that will require even more poitan, which would help out Dora and all of his people.

On top of that, Welhide had lost his father at the hands of Zattsu Suun and his ilk, so if it would help fulfill his wish, I really had no hesitation at all about spreading around the recipes for handmade soba and mayonnaise and the like.

“What do you think, Timalo and Varkas?” Marstein asked, turning toward the other chefs with a faint smile.

Unable to keep his emotions in check, Timalo was very much letting his frustration show on his face. “Well, I certainly could see this soba dish earning quite a reputation in the castle town. And furthermore...though they have fallen out of style, I could see such dishes drawing attention back toward fried

foods.”

“Would it be possible to sell this soba dish in Selva’s Spear?”

“If my employer desires it, I would comply...”

Though Timalo was now the head chef of Selva’s Spear, it seemed he still had an employer to answer to. My guess was it had to be some noble investing in him.

“Well then, what about you, Varkas?”

In response, Varkas nodded. “Yes, they are all splendid dishes. Just as Sir Yang stated, the condiments made to be added later seem incredibly versatile. Though Sir Asuta only prepared three dishes to unveil them with, I could see them being a good fit for a hundred, easily.” While it was hard to read any emotion from his tone, he certainly was talkative. As it had been quite a while since I’d last heard him appraise a dish, I couldn’t help but feel nervous. “Furthermore, the soba dish was extremely delicious as well. And the idea of using the same broth when eating the fried dishes was simply superb. It would surely earn highly positive reviews from the residents of the castle town.”

“Then do you plan to offer those dishes at your restaurant as well?”

“No,” Varkas replied. “I am planning on adding the dish known as shaska from Sym to my menu soon. As my apprentice Tatumai mentioned, this soba dish is quite similar, so if I am selling shaska, I will not be able to properly promote such a similar dish,” Varkas stated, turning toward me. “By the way, I am told it is possible to eat shaska both cold and warm, so can this soba dish be eaten warm as well?”

“Ah, yes. When you eat soba hot, it’s steeped in the broth to begin with. But when you do that, the noodles suck up the broth as time passes, and it’s harder to slurp them like we did before, so I didn’t think that would be appropriate for the occasion.”

“So warm soba exists as well? I could easily envision the taste, so I was certain that must be the case. Does steeping the fuwano in the broth to begin with soften the flavor?”

“It does. Just like with ordinary soup dishes, you can adjust the amount of

flavor you get by also slurping the broth.”

“How splendid. I would very much like to try such warm soba as well.” Though he remained just as expressionless as always, he probably would have grasped my hands again if we weren’t in such a formal setting at the moment.

Watching Varkas closely, Marstein gave a little smile and remarked, “You seem to have become quite infatuated with Asuta’s cooking as well. In that case, why not simply sell it alongside that shaska dish?”

Turning back to face the duke, Varkas once again replied, “No. I find Sir Asuta’s cooking simply wonderful. However, I have no need for his techniques.”

“You have no need...?”

“I have studied the cooking of Selva, Sym, and Jagar for many years. I perfected my own cooking by combining a wide variety of techniques from those three nations. If I carelessly add the techniques that Sir Asuta brings as a visitor from overseas, it would undoubtedly ruin the flavor. That is why it isn’t possible for me to adopt his methods for myself,” Varkas stated, still remaining expressionless all the while. “If I had encountered Sir Asuta when I was ten or twenty years younger, I surely would have admired him greatly and sought to blend his style into my own. But at this age, I cannot simply cast aside what I have fostered over so many years. So even if I am truly impressed by Sir Asuta’s cooking, I shall never be able to make use of it.”

“Hmm. So you will not be able to offer Asuta’s cooking in your own shop?”

“That is correct. The Silver Star is my own restaurant, and so I wish to only serve my own cooking.”

It seemed that Varkas was actually the owner of his business. He must have been paid quite handsomely by Cycloeus, if it allowed him to open up his own restaurant.

“But as I stated before, my plan is to serve shaska. If it comes to be accepted by the people of Genos, it should help provide a foundation for the acceptance of Sir Asuta’s soba as well. Hopefully, this will serve to spread awareness of black fuwano from Banarm at least a little.”

“Hmm. I suppose that works as a reasonable compromise,” Marstein said,

smiling again. He really was rather difficult to read too. “Then what of the dish prepared by the daughters of the Ruu clan? Is it also a dish based on the customs of your home nation, Asuta?”

“It seems that meat is often boiled in wine in both Sym and Mahyudra. That method is also used to some extent in Jagar. Giant muffur bears and mountain-raised gyama have a very strong stench to them, so their meat is commonly boiled in wine in Sym and Mahyudra in order to counteract that,” Varkas chimed in before I had a chance to reply. “But I find the dish unworthy of consideration beyond that.”

“Hmm? Whatever do you...”

“Just boiling meat in wine is enough to draw out quite a bit of flavor. However, this dish seems to do nothing more than just that. And the variety of seasonings added after that step feels inadequate.”

I could sense Reina Ruu gasping.

However, Varkas continued on, “My apprentice, Shilly Rou, participated in that tea party and told me the young chefs from the forest’s edge displayed tremendous skill, so I was anticipating a much bigger surprise tonight, which has left me quite disappointed.”

“Ah, Varkas, that’s...” I started to say without thinking, only for Reina Ruu to grab my arm.

“It’s fine, Asuta. It’s undoubtedly a fact that we lack experience as chefs.”

“No, but...”

“It’s fine.”

Reina Ruu’s hand was firmly gripping my wrist. It wasn’t permitted to touch members of the opposite sex outside of your family at the forest’s edge. However, Reina Ruu had been so badly shaken that she wasn’t even considering that. I could even see frustrated tears welling up in her pretty blue eyes.

“How harsh. Personally, I felt it was every bit as good as Asuta’s cooking.”

“That is quite rude toward Sir Asuta. Still, I suppose if you put it alongside the least of the dishes he has shown us, perhaps it would not seem inferior. At any

rate, if you find this dish delicious, that is thanks not to the skill of the chefs who prepared it, but rather to the giba meat itself.”

Though there still wasn’t any emotion in his voice, Varkas’s words had grown even crueler. Sheera Ruu quietly closed her eyes, while Toor Deen and Yun Sudra were glancing all around in a fluster. Lala Ruu was clearly just plain mad.

“I see you have just as sharp of a tongue as always, Varkas,” Lefreya chimed in for the first time, her tone prim and proper. “I suppose I have no right to find fault with you for your harsh words, but should you not restrain yourself at least somewhat in a place such as this?”

“Is that so? I was told we were to share our honest opinions here at this taste testing and simply abided by that.”

“Well, I suppose that is simply your nature...”

Lefreya went silent, seemingly fretting over something, only for another voice to chime in from the neighboring table.

“Still, it’s no small task to learn how to use a new ingredient in just a month or so. Not everyone is as skilled as you or Asuta,” Roy said.

Shilly Rou was standing there next to him, shooting him a really harsh glare. “Nobody asked to hear your opinion. If anyone here needs to be careful of what they say, it’s you.”

“My apologies. But it’s an apprentice’s duty to intervene when his master makes a slip of the tongue, isn’t it?”

“Varkas did no such...”

“Saying that dish was poorly made might not be much of a verbal gaffe. But I believe saying he is disappointed with the chefs of the forest’s edge is,” Roy stated, cutting Shilly Rou off. Though his words were polite, the look on his face remained just as sour as always. “The dish they made that I had in the post town was far more delicious than this stew here. It was good enough to make me throw away my pride and reputation to beg Varkas to accept me as an apprentice, to say the least. If you declare that the chefs of the forest’s edge are a disappointment based solely on this dish, it could come back to hurt your reputation down the line, Varkas.”

Shilly Rou's eyes were now blazing infernos as she glared at Roy's face.

However, Varkas just replied in the same exact tone, "Is that so? While I earnestly feel my expectations for this night were betrayed, I am not disappointed with the chefs of the forest's edge themselves. But if I caused any sort of misunderstanding, then allow me to apologize."

"Uh, no. Not at all..." Reina Ruu mumbled, hanging her head.

"Now then, is it not about time to sample our dishes as well? If too much time passes, their flavor will be impacted," Varkas said, finally bringing us into the back half of the taste testing.

3

"These are the three dishes I have created," Timalo announced triumphantly as a new set of platters were carried into the space between the tables one by one. "This is a black fuwano soup, these are black fuwano dumplings, and lastly, these vegetables are pickled in white mamaria vinegar."

"Ah, how terribly interesting."

Thanks to Roy, the awkward feeling in the air that Varkas had created had been completely cleared away. The folks from Banarm stared at the dishes carrying Timalo's cooking with great interest. Reina and Sheera Ruu were scrutinizing them as well, with deadly serious gazes.

For his soup dish, Timalo seemed to have thrown the black fuwano straight on in, creating a thick dark-gray stew. The fact that it looked a bit like muddy water definitely wasn't a positive, but fortunately it had a wonderful aroma. It seemed he had used some spicy herbs from Sym, as well as some sort of seafood.

As for the dumpling dish, it involved boiling the black fuwano dumplings with meat and vegetables and serving them together. The dumplings were around the same size as ping pong balls, and sure enough, were dark gray as well. The meat used was thin slices of karon, and as for the vegetables, I could at least pick out the paprika-like ma pula and taro-like ma gigo. Everything in the dish was covered in a creamy white broth.

Then you had the pickled dish, with a variety of vegetables thickly coated in a

translucent liquid. I made out the zucchini-like chan, carrot-like nenon, cabbage-like tino, and daikon-like sheema in the dish.

“Hmm. So you mixed the fuwano flour in directly?” the plump member of the envoy group asked as he peered into the soup dish being served to him by a page with great curiosity. He seemed as if he was about to lean forward and start sniffing it at any moment. “It certainly is novel, using the fuwano as-is rather than baking or boiling it. I cannot even begin to imagine how it will taste.”

“Well then, shall we give it a try?” Welhide chimed in, and the three members of the Banarm group moved to taste the soup.

Their reactions were really varied. Welhide lightly knitted his brow, the older man’s eyes shot open wide, and the plump fellow broke out in a wide grin.

“This...certainly is a difficult taste to describe...”

“Yes. I find it quite surprising.”

“Still, it’s rather good, isn’t it?”

They must not have been as accustomed to complex flavors as the nobles of Genos. Wanting to get some insight into their surprise, I went ahead and tried a bit of the soup myself.

The first thing that hit me was a tingling spiciness. He had undoubtedly used chitt seeds and at least two kinds of herbs. I could sense a hint of sourness too.

The seafood scent I had picked up seemed to be coming from a type of crustacean called a maroll, which were akin to sweet shrimp. Whether he had made a stock from them or had mashed them into a paste, they were providing quite a strong aroma, considering I couldn’t detect the texture of their meat in the dish at all.

He had also used sugar and tau oil on top of that, providing a fair bit of sweetness and saltiness. The combination of spiciness with sourness reminded me of Thai food, but then a sweetness like what you might expect from Japanese cooking was added on top, making for a truly complex flavor.

Then he had thrown in some black fuwano, which was akin to wheat or

buckwheat, making for a rather floury broth that sluggishly carried that complex flavor across my tongue. If I wanted to be harsh, I would call it overly heavy, and if I wanted to be positive instead, I would say it was a flavor that stirred up the appetite.

The ingredients included what was likely karon sirloin, and I could make out the texture of soft ma pula and tino. Aside from that, he seemed to have used chan, ro'hyoi, and ma gigo, but they were mushy and on the verge of falling apart. They might have made for a good stock, but in terms of texture, they had essentially fused with the soup itself.

"Hmm. There is nothing to complain about in regards to taste. However, it feels as if it clings to the throat a bit," Marstein said.

"Yes," Timalo replied while bowing his head. "That is the difference when compared to ordinary white fuwano. With white fuwano, it would go a bit more smoothly down the throat, but in exchange, the flavor vanishes soon afterward."

"I see. Well, it's no issue at all as long as you have tea or wine to accompany it."

At that, one of the pages silently approached and poured white mamaria wine into the duke's now-empty glass.

"This dumpling dish has a wondrous texture. Is that thanks to the black fuwano as well?" Polarth asked with a smile.

With a triumphant expression, Timalo replied, "Indeed. What sets black and white fuwano apart, aside from a small difference in flavor, is that texture. The different flavor can easily be overcome with herbs, and so I thought it best to try something that would emphasize the texture instead."

"Hmm. It's true that this would be difficult to recreate with white fuwano. Personally, I am quite fond of it."

With that, I went ahead and took a bite of the dish myself.

The fuwano dumplings had been boiled, so when I poked one with a silver fork, I found that it was very soft. I went ahead and tossed the whole thing into my mouth along with its creamy broth coating, and was first hit by the

sweetness of karon milk and panam honey.

While the karon milk was the base for the broth, the panam honey had definitely been kneaded into the fuwano dough. On top of that, I could pick up on the saltiness of tau oil and a cilantro-like flavor. The broth had soaked all the way through to the core of the dumpling, so it mixed together with the sweetness from the honey and created another complex and deep flavor.

Just as Polarth had said in his words of praise, even though it had soaked up so much broth, the fuwano still easily broke apart and passed down my throat. If he had used white fuwano or poitan instead, it would have been stickier and clung persistently to the inside of my mouth.

The rough graininess of the fuwano flour had created some friction in the previous soup, but in this dumpling dish it had instead produced a light texture. Making the flour into dumplings had produced completely opposite effects from just using it in its powdered form. I found the idea he had come up with quite unique.

“What do you think, leading clan head of the forest’s edge Dari Sauti? I recognize that the cooking of Genos isn’t very well suited to the tastes of your people, but could I ask for your honest opinion with that in mind?” Marstein asked.

Dari Sauti had remained silent all this time, but upon being directly questioned by the duke, he now looked up.

“I’m having a bit of difficulty eating this soup. I can at least handle these dumplings without any problems...but judging whether it is good or bad is proving tricky. To begin with, we have long since reached the point where any meal that doesn’t have any giba meat in it is simply lacking for us.”

“Hmm... But you looked quite satisfied when you ate the fried rillione dish prepared by Asuta.”

I had cooked that fried freshwater fish in order to pair it with the tartar sauce. At any rate, Dari Sauti blinked and looked like he really hadn’t expected that comment.

“Did I really seem that satisfied? Well, it’s true that I found it quite delicious

despite using fish instead of giba meat.”

“Yes, that fried dish was indeed fantastic. However, your dishes are also outstanding to those of us from Genos, Timalo.”

“I’m honored to receive such excessive praise,” Timalo replied with a polite bow of his head.

“These vegetables pickled in vinegar have a mysterious flavor as well. Despite strongly tasting of meat, I cannot find any meat in them at all,” Torst chimed in.

“Indeed,” Timalo replied with a smile. He really did seem to be brimming with confidence today. “That is not just mamaria vinegar. The liquid also has karon fat dissolved into it. I am quite proud of myself for having been able to draw out a different flavor than that of a pickled dish using red mamaria vinegar.”

With that, I reached out toward the last dish. However, this one wasn’t quite to my tastes. The sticky translucent liquid certainly was a mixture of white mamaria vinegar and karon fat. If I described it as a combination of vinegar and beef tallow, perhaps that would provide a clearer image? At any rate, he seemed to have used other herbs, but the vinegar and fat had such a strong presence that I couldn’t quite make them out.

Apparently, they had been marinated long enough to start fermenting, giving the vegetables themselves a strong sour flavor. Beyond that, since the taste was more fatty than meaty, the dish felt really, really heavy to me, which also made it incredibly hard to get down.

I glanced down and to my side and found Toor Deen looking at the floor with tears in her eyes after trying the same dish. I hurriedly held out a glass of tea, which she gulped down and then she let out an uncharacteristic “Phew...”

“Are you all right? You don’t have to force yourself to eat any more,” I whispered.

Toor Deen quietly said, “Thank you,” with teary eyes.

“How about you two, Reina and Sheera Ruu? It’s been some time since you tasted Timalo’s cooking, right?”

“That’s true... I don’t find it truly delicious, but the impression it’s giving me is

very different from back then,” Reina Ruu quietly answered. “If I had to say, I think it’s that I can now understand what sort of flavor he’s aiming for. It must be because I now know the taste of Varkas’s cooking.”

“Yeah, I feel the same way. It feels as if Varkas is standing far off in the direction Timalo is trying to run toward,” Sheera Ruu added.

At that, Eulifia called out, “What is it? If you have some thoughts, then we would like to hear them as well. That is why you are also here tasting the same dishes, is it not?”

“Ah, well... Black fuwano has a unique texture, and I think it’s great how Timalo drew that out to its fullest.”

“Hmm? And what do you have to say, Varkas?”

Varkas placed the bowl of soup he had been served down on his table with a clatter. “I have no real thoughts to share.”

“Oh? Are you dissatisfied with Timalo’s cooking?”

“If I had to say, then naturally, I am indeed dissatisfied. And I certainly can’t approve of such precious ingredients being used in such a way.”

Timalo’s smile instantly twitched. “Sir Varkas has never praised my cooking even once. It seems our methods and tastes differ too much.”

“Regardless of the methods used, delicious food remains delicious all the same. And I most certainly do not think your methods differ all that greatly from my own... As a result, the flaws stand out all the more.”

“Is my cooking truly that poor?”

“It is. For example, I would not have employed sugar in this soup. If you wished to make it sweet, you should have used minmi or ramam fruit. And maroll alone doesn’t provide enough flavor, so you should have used dried seaweed or fish,” Varkas stated, once again casually throwing out such harsh words. “In regard to the dumpling dish, the meddo herb was unnecessary. The way it clashes with the panam honey is quite unpleasant. And you should have used sugar and milk fat in the broth.”

“B-But would that not make it simply a sweet dish?”

“Sweetness and saltiness would be suitable for that dish. Adding an excess of flavors simply throws off the balance.”

While Timalo was getting angrier and angrier, Varkas was inversely growing ever more chilly.

“There is no need to even discuss the vegetables pickled in vinegar. What purpose could there be in using karon fat in such a dish? It worsens the flavor solely for the sake of novelty. Simply marinating the vegetables in white mamaria vinegar would have resulted in a far better taste.”

“Don’t you think that’s enough, Varkas?” Lefreya once again spoke up, acting as the voice of restraint. “I’m perfectly accustomed to hearing such exchanges between the two of you, but everyone else must be getting rather uncomfortable.”

Varkas didn’t show any emotion in the least as he gave a bow. Lefreya then shot Timalo a glare to stop him before he carried on further, before turning her gaze to the noble guests in attendance.

“Varkas and Timalo are both chefs who have served the house of Turan. Back then, they would always quarrel like this. As I am no longer their employer, there may not be a need for me to explain this on their behalf, but I would ask you to please understand that there is a history between the two of them,” Lefreya stated, resolute beyond her young age.

The folks from Banarm hummed in acknowledgment, sounding impressed with her. It seemed even the arrogant young Lefreya could act like a proper noblewoman when attending an official event such as this. Personally, I couldn’t help but find it a good change for her, seeing how she was able to take the initiative like that.

“Skilled chefs all tend to have a great deal of pride and strong emotions. If that wasn’t the case, I would have brought along the head chef from the castle, but it seems I was correct not to do so,” Marstein calmly added. “Well then, shall we finally partake in Varkas’s cooking? After everything he’s been saying, I am certain he has prepared a dish that we will greatly enjoy.”

The pages then carried in a new tray with a wooden platter that had a bell-shaped lid over it. Underneath the lid was a fragrant whole-roast kimyuus.

However, it was no ordinary whole-roast, as the kimyuus was jet black all over. We had already noticed this bizarre oddity back in the kitchen, but the nobles seeing it for the first time were quite surprised.

“What is that dish? It wasn’t simply overcooked and burned, was it?”

“This dish was made using black fuwano and gigi herbs. Shilly Rou.”

“Right.” The young chef nodded, approaching the plate. Apparently, it would be her job to cut the meat.

Using a butcher’s knife and metal skewers the pages offered her, Shilly Rou began slicing off pieces of kimyuus meat without even needing to take a moment to judge her cuts. What appeared from underneath the pitch black surface was lustrous peach-colored meat. She made her cuts in a way that ensured that every piece had some of the black skin on it, and when she was done, she carefully took a small jar and poured some broth that seemed like it was probably pretty hot over the meat.

“Thank you for waiting. Please, enjoy.”

Shilly Rou then swiftly stepped aside, and the pages began handing out pieces of meat on small plates. The kimyuus had been a rather large one, but as there were thirty people present, we each only received a small amount.

Just going by the aroma, it was already clear that this was a fantastic dish. I could smell the sweet and salty tau oil, the fragrant aroma of cooked meat, and a number of spicy herbs mixing together in a complex manner. It was a wondrous scent that stimulated my fairly full stomach once again.

After taking a bite, Marstein started to say, “Hmm, this is...” but even he was unable to complete his thought. The other noble men and women also all let slip sounds of admiration. Only Melfried and Arishuna were able to retain a calm and composed appearance.

As I listened to their voices, I reached for my own plate. Just the fact that Varkas had made the dish was enough to make my heart pound with anticipation.

The surface had been cooked up nice and crispy. Just like with the fish he had made last time, he must have added countless layers of glaze while roasting it.

The combination of the tender meat and aromatic skin was simply exquisite.

All kimyuus meat had a plain flavor akin to a chicken tender. But the black surface layer added some real complexity to go along with that simple meaty taste. What I picked up on most strongly was sweetness and spiciness. However, I found it quite difficult to determine what they had come from. I could sense the flavor of panam honey, but there was also the mellow sweetness of fruit as well. Even in just this one aspect, it truly was a flavor with some real depth.

The spiciness, meanwhile, must have come from herbs. It wasn't a sharp, stinging spice, but instead was a kind that gradually stimulated the tongue. And the broth that was added at the end must have used a white mamaria vinegar base. That unique sourness and flavor coupled with the sweetness and spiciness of the black coating led to a fantastic synergy.

Concentrating further, I found a peculiar taste hidden underneath. I would have missed it without paying careful attention, but it was a unique sort of bitterness. At first I thought it had come from the cooked surface or the skin, but apparently that wasn't the case. It was a strange flavor that brought to mind cacao or the like, and it was serving as the nucleus of the dish.

Did it come from some sort of herb as well? At any rate, it wasn't a flavor I recognized. It was faint enough that I could have easily mistaken it for the meat being slightly burnt, but when I paid careful attention I could tell the bitterness served to tighten up the overall flavor. It felt as if the bitter flavor was able to combine the sweetness, spiciness, sourness, and saltiness all into one.

"The kimyuus skin is black because I coated it in black fuwano flour and gigi," Varkas calmly explained. "Gigi herbs are difficult to handle, but I was able to successfully bring them into harmony with the black fuwano and white mamaria vinegar. I added grated ramam, reten oil, tau oil, karon milk, and herbs such as sarfaal to the black fuwano and gigi coating, while the broth uses white mamaria wine and vinegar, panam honey, and ramanpa nuts."

As I listened to him speak, I licked a bit of that clear broth on its own. Sure enough, I could taste the ingredients he had listed off, though the amount of fruit wine must have been kept low to make it a subtle secret ingredient. With

the white mamaria vinegar base, it had a flavor that emphasized sourness and sweetness.

I also scraped off a chunk of black coating not covered in the broth to try on its own, and this time around I could clearly pick up on the bitterness. That must have come from the herb he called gigi. Black fuwano was actually more of a grayish-brown, so the jet black color had to have come from that herb.

I could also just barely detect the flavor and saltiness of the tau oil, but I couldn't really pick out the ramam or the karon milk. However, I definitely sensed a mellow sweetness beyond the bitterness. Without the broth, the spiciness was making my tongue sting a good bit, though. It seemed the dish was only truly complete with the broth and the coating combined.

"To think that Varkas could create this flavor out of a bland meat like kimyuus..." Reina Ruu whispered quietly enough that only I would hear. "It's forcing me to recognize how far below him I am all over again. I'm embarrassed to have served such a poor dish."

"But you two don't consider that dish perfected yet, right? And I'm the one who pushed you to present it..."

"Even so, it doesn't change the fact that I don't have enough experience yet."

I looked over at her face with concern, but rather than appearing dejected, she seemed to be burning with competitive spirit. From her other side, Sheera Ruu brought her face close.

"I'm certain this flavoring wouldn't pair properly with giba or karon meat. It was a taste he was able to achieve only because he used kimyuus... I would be so happy if we could come up with a recipe using giba meat that stacks flavors on top of each other like this and tastes just as good."

"Yeah. I wonder what sort of herb gigi is... I'd like to see how it would taste with giba."

When talking with Sheera Ruu, Reina Ruu used the same tone she did with family and was able to show her excitement more openly, which was a relief for me.

"Yes, this certainly is a splendid dish. Still, I cannot imagine anyone but you

would be able to prepare something this elaborate, Varkas,” Marstein finally said, causing Varkas to tilt his head questioningly.

“I believe my apprentices should be able to create something that approaches this flavor.”

“In that case, the dish could only be made in your restaurant, correct? I cannot say that would do much for our goal of promoting the usage of these ingredients from Banarm.”

“However, this is a dish that can only be made using the fuwano and mamaria from Banarm. It should serve to inform my shop’s customers about how wonderful they can be.”

“But how many people will actually be convinced to order Banarm’s fuwano and mamaria for themselves? Well, so be it... There is no point in quibbling over the matter. I would certainly like to have you continue to make food as delicious as this using your own methods.”

“Very well,” Varkas replied with a bow of his head. Beyond him, I could see Timalo standing there quietly with his eyes closed. His face still looked rather pale, and he didn’t show any signs of recovering.

Now that I think about it, Timalo spent many years beside Varkas, having their skills compared. He must have a pretty strong spirit to not let that break him, I thought to myself.

Then Eulifia excitedly proclaimed, “Now, it is finally time for Yang to debut his dish, is it not? We have been looking forward to your sweet most of all.”

That “we” must have been referring to the noblewomen. Lady Besta and Lady Selanju, who looked almost like sisters, had a real shine in their eyes as they stood beside the next duchess in line.

The next plate to be brought out held sweets made of thin black fuwano dough shaped like spring rolls. They looked like they had been fried in buttery milk fat, and they carried a heavy aroma of the stuff too.

“My, you fried it rather than baking it?”

“Indeed. The sweet that Sir Asuta prepared for the tea party was so splendid

that it ended up inspiring me,” Yang said. However, I had made donuts that time. His sweet might have been a fragrant fried dish, but it seemed more pie-like than donut-like.

The gray spring roll-looking sweets had a light pink sauce drizzled over them, with pulpy bits sprinkled throughout that seemed to be minmi fruit, which were similar to peaches.

“Ooh, how tasty!” Yun Sudra declared, before shrinking down and blushing bright red.

Seeing her acting so adorably, Eulifia smiled and said, “Do not worry. We said we wished to have everyone voice their honest opinions, did we not? I find it quite delicious myself.”

“I am truly grateful,” Yang said with a polite bow of his head.

I tried it myself and found it was every bit as good as the sweet he had served at the tea party. It had a crust seemingly made using karon milk and kimyuus egg, giving it a great deal of flavor and an enjoyable crispy texture. Finally, hidden inside the wrap was a sort of jam with an arow and sheel fruit base.

The panam honey and minmi fruit sauce was quite sweet, but the jam had a more restrained sweetness to compensate. The arow berries combined well with the citrusy sourness of the sheel, with an added fruity sweetness that had to have come from white mamaria wine. He must’ve boiled off the alcohol by heating it along with the fruits, creating a gentle flavor that even young children could enjoy.

Also, the pastry seemed to have two additional sources of texture aside from the perfect toughness of the crust and the soft gooeyness of the jam. One of them must have been fibers of kimyuus meat, like last time. The stringy kimyuus breast meat had been finely torn up, giving the dish a rather pleasant chewiness.

The other one seemed like it came from some sort of fruit or vegetable. It had been minced up into small pieces and didn’t provide any real taste to speak of. All it seemed to do was provide a bit of soft and juicy resistance as it easily broke down when you chewed it, adding yet another enjoyable texture to the mix.

“This is ma pula, is it not?” Varkas questioned.

“Yes,” Yang calmly replied with a nod. “Ma pula boiled in white mamaria wine. I added it because the chewiness felt lacking.”

Ma pula—a subspecies of pula—was a vegetable similar to paprika. It lacked pula’s bitterness, and I frequently used it to add color or texture myself.

“What a splendid idea. Just as Shilly Rou told me, you truly seem to be one of the foremost chefs here in Genos when it comes to making sweets.”

“It is the highest of honors as a chef to hear such praise from you, Sir Varkas.”

After giving him a nod, Varkas then turned toward Timalo.

“You are similarly skilled to Sir Yang when it comes to producing sweets, Sir Timalo. It is amazing what heightening a single flavor can do, and if you would apply such techniques to your general cooking, I am certain you could manage to make a fine dish.”

Timalo was biting into Yang’s dish with a frown that quickly grew more intense as he sent a glare Varkas’s way. From his point of view, the person giving him that advice was someone he saw as a rival, so it certainly wouldn’t make him happy to hear it.

“Yes, it truly does have a fantastic flavor. It seems the fuwano of Banarm is well suited for sweets,” Marstein said.

“Indeed,” Yang politely replied. “Trying to bake it as you normally would results in something blander than what you would get from using the standard white fuwano, but with just a bit of added effort, you can make a truly delicious sweet. A great many people here in the castle town eat sweets as snacks, and I believe it will find acceptance easily.”

“In that case, I would like to have Timalo show us his skills as Yang has. You are quite famed among the noblewomen for your confections, are you not?”

“Yes...” Timalo said with a bow, a rather complex expression on his face. Varkas had disparaged the cooking he had prepared, and yet he was being praised for his skill at making sweets, so it was like he was being pulled in two directions at once.

“What do you think, Odifia? You adore sweets like this as well, do you not?” Eulifia asked her child.

The adorable young girl who looked like a French doll nodded and answered, “It’s tasty. But are these all the sweets they have for us?”

“My, you haven’t had enough yet? There are still a few left on the plate.”

“No, not those. I wanna eat that girl’s sweets.”

Naturally, “that girl” referred to none other than Toor Deen. Anyone who had been listening to their conversation then turned to look at the young chef, making her cling to me from behind.

“You certainly are taken with her sweets. In that case, it is only polite that you at least remember her name properly. That small chef from the forest’s edge is named Toor Deen.”

“Toor Deen,” Odifia pronounced surprisingly clearly as she stared the young chef’s way.

“Leading clan head Dari Sauti, as you heard, my daughter Odifia is quite thoroughly taken with the sweets prepared by Toor Deen. Would it be possible to invite her to the castle town again in the future?” Eulifia asked, her gaze turning toward Dari Sauti rather than her father-in-law or husband.

The leading clan head looked at the noble mother and daughter clad in their pure white dresses and gently smiled. “As long as it does not interfere with her work at the forest’s edge, I cannot see any reason for the Deen clan head to refuse. However, the Deen clan falls under the Zaza, so they would need to give their permission first.”

“My, is there not a member of the Zaza clan present here today?”

In response, Sufira Zaza quietly stepped forward from where she had been standing along the wall. “I am Sufira Zaza, the youngest daughter of the Zaza clan head, Gulaf Zaza... You say you wish to request the cooking skills not of Asuta of the Fa clan, but of Toor Deen?”

“Yes, though I of course would be quite happy to have Asuta accompany her. Having him along might be reassuring for Toor Deen.”

“I see... In that case, I shall convey your words to my clan head, Gulaf,” Sufira Zaza expressionlessly replied as she stared at Toor Deen’s back. The young chef was still clinging to me, and I suspected that she wanted to straight up vanish at that point.

With a deeply satisfied smile, Eulifia then turned toward her husband. Melfried had yet to say so much as a word, and with a chilly look in his gray eyes, he started to open his mouth, only to notice his daughter staring up at him. Instead, he just sighed.

As he looked upon his son’s family with a strained smile, Marstein seemed to collect his thoughts and said, “Now then, let us enjoy an ordinary dinner along with what remains of these dishes. Varkas’s apprentices have prepared quite a feast for us.”

Following Marstein’s words, the pages once again started carrying in even more dishes. Aside from Bozl, Varkas’s other three apprentices had been preparing this meal rather than assisting the master chef. A simmering soup and karon meat dish were laid out atop the tables, as well as a colorful vegetable dish.

“And for a bit of entertainment, we have arranged to have a small contest between Shin Ruu, a hunter from the forest’s edge, and Geimalos, the head of the knights of Saturas. Please, enjoy.”

One of the pages then approached the wall that was to our right. He pulled open the curtain hanging there, revealing a large open window behind it. It looked to be around one meter high and seven or eight wide. There were a number of posts in the middle to reinforce it, but they didn’t block our view of what was on the other side in the least.

Looking through the window, I saw a wide stone-built stage. It was outdoors, but it did have both a floor and a roof for cover. It appeared to be around ten meters in diameter, and was surrounded by thick stone pillars that supported the roof. There were also fires burning in hanging iron braziers that were affixed to the pillars to provide light, since the trees visible above the roof were casting shadows over everything.

We hurriedly moved closer to the window. The nobles seemingly intended to

enjoy their meal while they watched, but I was in no mood for eating. Lala Ruu placed her hands on the window sill and leaned forward.

Ai Fa, Jiza Ruu, and Gazraan Rutim silently lined up behind us. With a window of this size, we didn't have to worry about Marstein and the others not being able to see. However, like Lala Ruu, I was so worried about Shin Ruu's safety that I wasn't particularly concerned about inconveniencing the nobles regardless.

Just don't get hurt, Shin Ruu...for Lala Ruu's sake.

From beyond the light cast by the flames, two swordsmen then stepped forward, with pages guiding them. Though they were both clad in silver armor, one of them was undoubtedly a young dark-skinned hunter from the forest's edge: Shin Ruu.

4

"Both sides are carrying unsharpened swords and wearing armor made specifically for such contests. There will most certainly not be any danger to either of their lives, so please do not worry," Marstein explained.

Sure enough, both of them were clad from head to toe in silvery armor. It was even bulkier than the armor worn by Melfried and the ducal guards when on duty, and was coated in countless bits of ornamentation, appearing to be quite the fine goods. It was the sort of thing you'd expect to see decorating western-style manors or the like in manga.

If the armor were metal all the way through, they wouldn't have been able to move properly, so it must have had pieces of leather under the copper or steel plates. But at any rate, they both looked amazingly gallant, clad in gleaming metal all the way down to the tips of their fingers and toes.

The helmets they wore were beautifully crafted as well, with large red tassels hanging down from their crowns. Their elaborate faceplates were currently raised, so I could make out the fierce blaze burning brightly in Shin Ruu's eyes even from this distance.

The pair also bore compact shields on their left arms and had long blades

dangling from their hips. The shields seemed to be affixed to their bracers rather than being held in their hands, stretching from the back of their hands to their elbows, and were elliptical in shape with a width of about twenty centimeters.

“Hmm. Sir Geimalos’s name is well known even as far away as Banarm. He is reputed to be one of the three greatest swordsmen in all of Genos,” the plump member of the envoy group stated casually.

“That’s right,” Leeheim replied. “And furthermore, he happens to be my uncle. He is the younger brother of the head of our house and also leads the knights of Saturas.”

Geimalos was a large, muscular man, easily over 180 centimeters tall. He had at least half a head on Shin Ruu, and his build was roughly equivalent to that of Jiza Ruu and Gazraan Rutim. In terms of breadth, he surely surpassed them, and with that thick armor on, he looked even bigger.

The face I could spy under the helmet had large glaring eyes and a splendid mustache under his nose. He was probably just a bit shy of forty. Though I certainly wouldn’t call him young for a swordsman, the strongest hunters at the forest’s edge like Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim were even older. At the very least, he certainly looked the part of a distinguished knight of Genos.

“The hunters of the forest’s edge seemingly possess unparalleled strength. We can expect that even one so young will possess a shocking level of skill. I’m terribly looking forward to seeing how long he’ll be able to hold out against my uncle Geimalos.”

Perhaps because he was speaking to the guests, Leeheim was maintaining a polite tone, yet his voice was clearly dripping with ridicule, and with the young noblewomen calling out coquettishly at the same time, naturally Lala Ruu was directing a searing glare at all of them without them noticing.



“Do not worry. Someone from town could never get the better of Shin Ruu,” Jiza Ruu quietly whispered from behind Lala Ruu.

“Yeah.” She nodded back at him, her gaze still firmly fixed on the outdoor stage. Beside her, Shin Ruu’s elder sister, Sheera Ruu, was also watching intently.

“Well then, let the swordsmanship competition commence!” one of the pages who had led them to the stage solemnly proclaimed. “If either side drops their blade, admits defeat, or lets their back touch the ground, the match shall be decided! In the name of the western god Selva, let this be a fair and just contest!”

Geimalos gave a hearty bow and drew the sword from his hip. The blade itself was straight, eighty centimeters long, and made of steel. Even if it didn’t have a cutting edge, it would still work well enough as a blunt weapon. You wouldn’t be able to just shrug it off if you got hit with something like that without armor.

Geimalos stretched out his arm and extended his sword forward. Shin Ruu similarly drew his blade and brought its tip up to lightly meet his opponent’s. They must have talked about how they would greet each other onstage in advance, but it still looked really impressive. The princely act earned even more shrill shrieks from the noblewomen.

Still, something felt strange to me, somehow. Shin Ruu’s movements seemed a bit overly stiff.

Now that I thought about it, Shin Ruu had been walking rather rigidly when he’d stepped up onto the stage as well. Perhaps he was having a hard time moving with the armor on, since he wasn’t used to wearing it.

A hunter’s strength should be more than enough to deal with the weight of leather armor, but I guess it’s still giving him a significant handicap in terms of how smoothly he can move.

Shin Ruu’s greatest strength was his swiftness. He had even managed to defeat Ji Maam, so if he were in a situation where he could show off his full skill, a simple difference in builds wouldn’t be any real issue at all...but with things as they were, I couldn’t help getting a sense of foreboding.

I have no idea what Leeheim and Marstein were thinking. It's fine if he loses, but I hope he at least doesn't get hurt... I thought to myself, right before the pages silently stepped back. In their place, an old man clad in a long white cloak moved forward. Though he seemed to be quite elderly, he looked hale and hearty, and was standing up straight. It was almost like looking at the Rutim elder, Raa Rutim, back during the contest of strength held at the Ruu clan's festival of the hunt.

"In the name of Selva... Begin!"

Geimalos lowered his visor and stepped back. Meanwhile, Shin Ruu just stayed in position, standing completely upright. He lowered his right arm, which was holding his blade, and the weapon's tip clattered against the stone of the stage.

Geimalos lowered his hips and slowly began circling around to Shin Ruu's right. However, the young hunter didn't move. He just stood there as stiff as a board, not even turning to keep Geimalos in front of him.

Lala Ruu was lacing her fingers together in front of her chest, and even the nobles were holding their breath as they watched the stage.

Then, Geimalos charged right at Shin Ruu from the side, and still the Ruu hunter did not move. Even his head remained pointed straight forward, leaving me to wonder if he could possibly respond to Geimalos's attack. I felt so worried that I almost wanted to shout out.

Perhaps Geimalos found it strange too, as he protected his chest with his left arm while holding out his blade with his right, and stopped in place for a moment.

With that, a silence that seemed to crawl up my spine filled the air.

Finally, Geimalos stepped forward. As he did so, he lunged forward with his sword as if he were fencing. He was aiming for Shin Ruu's defenseless flank, and from an incredibly short distance.

I almost screamed, imagining Geimalos's blade carving into the young hunter's side. It just looked like such an impossible strike to escape. The noblewomen were openly crying out at this point.

However, the premonition I had seen was shattered in the next moment. As nimbly as a wild beast, Shin Ruu sent his right arm flying upward. Geimalos's blade was deflected, and the momentum behind Shin Ruu's blade kept it going until it struck his opponent's shield, which deflected it upward, right into the knight's visor.

With a weighty clang that resounded through the air, Geimalos's huge frame was sent flying.

His blade had snapped right in the center. His crushed helmet arced through the air, and his body went right along with it. Then, after flying roughly two meters, Geimalos came crashing down atop the stone floor with a serious clatter, after which he didn't move.

A frightening silence fell over the space.

Geimalos had collapsed facedown on the ground, where a red pool of blood was forming.

His left arm—the one with the shield—was twisted in a strange direction. If he hadn't broken a bone, then he had at least dislocated a joint. His shoulder and elbow were definitely bent in a way they weren't supposed to be.

A moment later, a heavy clattering noise sounded out. Shin Ruu had dropped his blade and fallen to his knees.

"Shin Ruu!" Lala Ruu shouted, leaping through the window. After a few seconds of hesitating, I went ahead and followed after her. Ai Fa must have sensed something was wrong, as she came along rather than trying to stop me. "Shin Ruu, are you all right?! What in the world happened?!" Lala Ruu questioned, clinging to him without paying any attention at all to the old referee standing there dumbfounded. Shin Ruu kept on hanging his head, but he did shift his gaze to look at her.

"There's not really much to explain. This armor is just quite heavy."

"The armor is heavy?! That's all?! The way you were moving was completely bizarre!"

"I couldn't fight like I normally would wearing something like this. Because of that, I wasn't able to hold back in the least. Is my opponent all right?"

“Who cares about him?!” Lala Ruu shot back pitilessly, hugging Shin Ruu, even with his armor still on.

Behind her stood a rather large figure: Jiza Ruu, who had followed along at some point.

“Shin Ruu, may I remove your headpiece?” he stated in the same tone as always, reaching down toward Shin Ruu’s throat. After swiftly undoing the leather strap, he slowly lifted the silver-colored helmet off the young hunter’s head. And as soon as it was off, Lala Ruu rubbed her cheek up against Shin Ruu’s.

“Hmm. It certainly is quite heavy,” Jiza Ruu noted after scrutinizing the helmet for a moment. Then he picked up Geimalos’s helmet from the ground.

It seemed the armor piece, which had nearly been split in two, really was only metal on the outside. Considering that it had been broken by the same slash that had also repelled the man’s sword and shield, Shin Ruu’s attack must have had some incredible strength behind it.

Around then, a large crowd finally started rushing over to Geimalos. But rather than nobles, they were pages and men clad in white. Most likely, the latter were some sort of doctors.

“Lala, that’s enough. Shin Ruu, can you stand?”

“Yes,” Shin Ruu replied, slowly rising. He was moving even more stiffly, almost like a robot, calling to mind the knight king Rolo from the Gamley Troupe.

“I see... So that’s why,” Ai Fa stated.

Jiza Ruu nodded. “Indeed.” Then, he turned back toward the building. “I wish to ask a question of Duke Marstein Genos! Is there some reason that the two of them seem to be wearing completely different armor?”

“What do you mean, different armor?” one of the figures standing in the window calmly asked.

Jiza Ruu continued in a clear tone, “This Geimalos man wears armor made of steel over leather, while Shin Ruu’s armor is steel all the way through. It would not be possible for him to move properly, clad in such a thing, which I believe is

why he put all of his strength into that one strike.”

“Someone confirm what Jiza Ruu just said...” Marstein ordered in turn, and an elderly man—one of the people wearing the white cloaks—approached us unsteadily. The solemn dignity he had been showing up until just a moment ago had entirely vanished at this point. He reached out toward the armor Shin Ruu wore and gave it a tap with the back of his hand, then his face went completely pale as he turned back toward the building.

“This...seems to be the sort of steel plate armor worn by cavalry. How did such a thing end up here in a swordsmanship contest?”

“I see. Jiza Ruu, could I ask you to come over here with Shin Ruu?”

After entrusting the helmet to Ai Fa, Jiza Ruu lent Shin Ruu a shoulder and half lifted him up before returning to the duke with him as requested. I went ahead and followed after them, accompanied by a sniffing Lala Ruu.

Marstein was standing there with his hands on the windowsill, just as we had been doing a little while ago. After accepting the helmet from Ai Fa, he gave us a “Hmm,” with a nod and a grave look. “This is indeed a helmet meant for cavalry... As they fight on toposback and have no need to walk on the ground, their armor is made entirely of steel. Such equipment has little use in a land as peaceful as Genos, but we still have a number of suits meant for special occasions such as wedding ceremonies.”

“So it isn’t supposed to be worn in contests of swordsmanship?”

“Of course not. The armor Geimalos has on is the standard for such events. After all, it takes a person’s full strength to even be able to walk with full steel plate armor on.” Marstein then casually turned back to face the room. “Today’s contest was organized entirely by the house of Saturas. That includes the equipment. So, what is your explanation for this?”

Everyone’s gazes were fixed squarely on Leeheim, who was standing in the middle of the room and looking around in a fluster. “I-I cannot say... That is a task for pages and servants, so even if you ask me...”

“Then you claim you were unaware?”

“O-Of course!”

“This is quite a serious matter,” Marstein stated with a thin smile, then he turned toward Melfried, who stood at his side. “In that case, we shall need to thoroughly investigate to discover who was behind this plot. Melfried, the honor of the ducal guards is on the line, so find the fool responsible.”

“Understood,” Melfried replied, a chilly shine in his gray eyes.

Leeheim had broken out in a cold sweat and was biting his thumbnail. Was it really possible that he’d had nothing to do with it, considering the circumstances? He was the one who had suggested a hunter from the forest’s edge for the contest, and he’d also chosen his own uncle as the opponent. Jiza Ruu’s eyes had narrowed even further by this point, and were fixed on Leeheim’s ghostly pale face.

“At any rate, this is an act that tramples upon the very spirit of the western god. In the name of Duke Genos, I swear to do all I can to clean up after this shameful crime. Can you trust my words on this matter, Jiza Ruu?”

“I would like to believe them. And my father, the leading clan head Donda Ruu, would surely reply in much the same way.”

“Then all that remains is for us to live up to that trust. Someone, help Shin Ruu to change!”

One of the pages that were gathered around Geimalos came running. After watching him hurry over, Jiza Ruu once again turned toward Marstein.

“I was thinking of having one of the guards waiting outside the doors accompany him. Would you permit that?”

“Of course,” Marstein replied, and so Giran Ririn was summoned in. Jiza Ruu then asked if Lala Ruu could go along as well, and with that request granted, those three people of the forest’s edge walked away from the stage. With that, we finally headed back inside the room.

“I say, that was an absolutely astounding match! It seems there was a slipup of sorts, but in the end all it did was make it an even better showing of the strength possessed by the hunters of the forest’s edge,” the plump envoy stated. He wore a relaxed smile as he held up a piece of karon meat on a silver skewer. “Even the famed Sir Geimalos went down in a single blow! And from

what I saw, the hunter still seemed to be a youth! I greatly underestimated him.”

“Yes, many swordsmen would have exhausted their strength just making it up onto the stage. After all, he *was* wearing cavalry armor.” Marstein was also smiling casually to conceal what he was feeling inside. But the folks from Banarm didn’t seem to have taken the situation to be all that serious regardless. In a way, their laid-back response was a big help to us.

The noblewomen who had been shrieking earlier were still carrying on, while the chefs were feigning ignorance and simply satisfying their appetites. But the nobles of Genos, Polarth and Torst especially, looked quite tense as they whispered among themselves.

The culprit still hadn’t been determined, but someone with ties to the castle town had tried to catch the people of the forest’s edge in a trap. The wrongdoings of the house of Turan had been exposed and the relationship between us and the nobility was finally being mended, only for someone from the castle town to do something this outrageous. It certainly wasn’t a matter that could simply be overlooked.

Is Leeheim really that sloppy? Or maybe he was making light of us, figuring he wouldn’t be punished for something like this, as the heir to the house of Saturas.

Those traitors from Dabagg—Digola, the head of the trading firm, and Meilos, who was in charge of external affairs—had been amazingly shortsighted scoundrels. If they had been a bit craftier, their crimes wouldn’t have been exposed, but they had dug their own graves by underestimating the people of the forest’s edge and the nobles of Genos.

Marstein definitely doesn’t want to upset the people of the forest’s edge at this point. But what sort of punishment would be fitting for this kind of thing? I hope this doesn’t turn into a serious problem, I thought to myself.

Then I heard a voice call out, “Asuta,” from beside me. When I turned to look, I found a familiar star reader standing there.

“Oh. What is it, Arishuna?”

“Well, I wished, to greet you, so I got permission, from Duke Genos.”

Looking around, I saw that the nobles seemed to have calmed back down, at least on the surface, and were chatting away again. Arishuna was wearing a dress that was fittingly gorgeous for her role as a star reader, and she gave me a highly elegant bow. “Today’s dishes, were wonderful. I ate nothing, but your cooking.”

“Ah ha ha, I appreciate it.”

“The first dish, was especially good. I don’t know, much about shaska, but I love, your soba. Would it, be strange, to eat soba, and curry together?”

“No, folks back in my home country would eat it that way too. But in that case, a dish called udon using white fuwano may be a better fit. And the best way to have it might be to mix the curry into a stock and make it into a soup.”

“That sounds, so delicious, I can hardly imagine...” Arishuna stated, remaining perfectly expressionless all the while. And then, someone else approached.

“Hey, don’t go sneaking off to chat with him all on your own! I want to talk to Asuta too!” Diel chimed in. She had a silver accessory adorning her short hair that was lighter or darker in various places, and was wearing a blue dress. She had been maintaining a formal expression all this time, but now she was glaring out of the corner of her eyes at Arishuna, only to then suddenly break out in her usual grin. “Long time no see, Asuta! I need to get permission to even greet you here in the castle town. It’s such a pain.”

“You seem full of energy, Diel. How did you find our cooking?”

“It was delicious! I think I liked that giba meat sauté with the mamaria vinegar best. Oh, and the dish you guys made was just as tasty,” Diel said, turning toward Reina and Sheera Ruu. “Don’t worry about what that Varkas guy said! If it were me, I’d love to eat it every single day. I think I’ll be able to visit the post town once the revival festival is over, and I’ll definitely stop by then!”

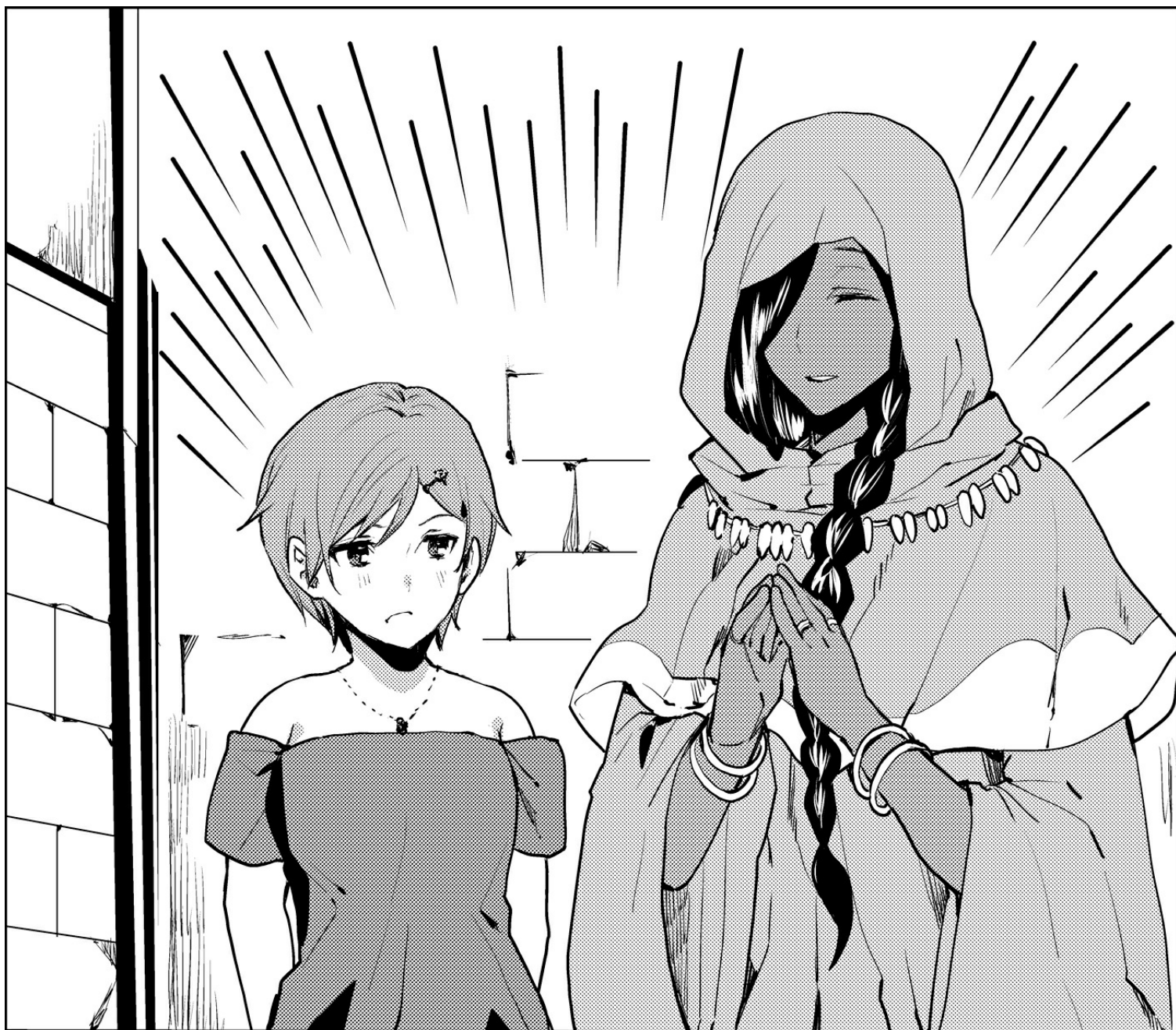
“G-Good, thank you.”

Reina and Sheera Ruu both bowed their heads, seeming a bit bewildered. Diel gave them both another pleased look, but then glared at Arishuna once again.

“Now that I think about it, you’ve been having Asuta’s cooking delivered to the castle town every day, haven’t you? That’s pretty unfair, isn’t it?”

“Not every day. Just when, giba curry, is being sold.”

“It’s still no fair! I want to eat Asuta’s cooking too!” Diel said while puffing up her cheeks, causing me to chuckle without thinking. Even dressed up like a noblewoman, she was still her same old lovably energetic self.



“You two sure do seem to be getting along well. Did you become friends back at the tea party?”

“Why would I be friends with an easterner?! It’s just that the nobles of Genos seem to look at us as if we have a similar status, so we sometimes see one another at banquets and stuff like this.”

“I do not, hate southerners. However, I’m not, fond of noisiness.”

“Hmph! And I can’t stand folks like you with faces like dolls!”

Diel’s eyes, lively like sparkly jade, were clashing against Arishuna’s, which were as calm as a lake at night. But considering their nations were mortal enemies, this staring contest seemed almost heartwarming.

“So why exactly did the two of you come over here?” Ai Fa said, joining in on the conversation.

Turning her way, Diel said, “Oh, it’s you,” with a broad smile. “What do you mean? I just wanted to greet Asuta, since I haven’t seen him for a while.”

“I see. But the two of you were guests invited by the nobles, correct? It doesn’t seem appropriate for you to spend so much time on a casual chat with Asuta.”

“Huh? That’s why we had to wait for an opportunity to leave our seats! We don’t need you acting all strict with us too.”

“I’m not especially concerned about you...” Ai Fa retorted, her gaze then shifting from Diel to Arishuna. The star reader gave an expressionless tilt of her head in response.

“Do you, hate me?”

“Not particularly,” Ai Fa said, a complex look in her eyes. And then, I finally picked up on what she was concerned about.

“It’s all right, Ai Fa. There’s no need for you to be worried because of Arishuna.”

Ai Fa must have been concerned about the incident with Neeya from the other day, when the old fortune teller, Railanos, had realized that I was a

“starless one” right away and conveyed that to Neeya, who had sung me the song of Misha the White Sage.

Arishuna had also seen through my identity some time ago, and she had let slip that starless ones didn’t come from this world. But Arishuna had apologized for speaking about it so carelessly later, and since that had happened in this very building, Ai Fa had also been there.

“I’m not fond of star reading to begin with...” Ai Fa quietly muttered.

“I see,” Arishuna replied with a little nod. “I feel, much the same. Because my grandfather, possessed the power, to read stars, he was exiled, from our homeland. But it is, all I have, to make a living.”

Ai Fa remained silent.

Arishuna continued, “However, star reading, is a business, for me. As long as, Asuta does not, wish for it, I will not, read his star. If my previous, slip of the tongue, angered you, I will apologize, as much, as it takes.” Then she started to bow her head.

“Stop that,” Ai Fa interjected. “I have no intention of condemning you for the same mistake again and again. But I do not know you all that well, so I cannot fully trust your words.”

“Yeah, easterners just aren’t trustworthy,” Diel chimed in cheerfully, despite knowing nothing of the circumstances. “And they’re all so expressionless, like they’re wearing masks. If you want other people to be able to reach an understanding with you, why not at least crack a smile every now and then?”

“It is shameful, to allow emotions, to show, on your face...”

“Hmph. Guess that makes us all shameless, huh?”

“It is no shame, if you are not, a child, of Sym... But I shall strive, to earn your trust.”

As that exchange was going on, the pages were carrying out fresh plates. At some point, we had reached the final stage of the banquet, as they had started serving up sweets to finish things off.

“Ugh, thanks to you and our little argument, I lost the chance to take my time

and chat! Hey Asuta, there's something I need to tell you real quick."

"Huh? What is it?"

"It's about the competition from before. I thought I heard something about cavalry armor. Is that right? If it is, then that swordsman your hunter beat, Geimalos, probably had something to do with it."

Ai Fa and I both gasped in surprise.

"Wh-What makes you say that? Do you have some sort of proof?"

"I wouldn't quite say that. But I happened to be strolling around the inner garden when the armor was being carried into the manor. I overheard the pages and servants chatting to each other, and they were saying that Sir Geimalos had ordered them to keep it in a locked room until the hunter from the forest's edge arrived."

I started glancing around the room for Leeheim. He was over in a corner, not talking to anyone and chugging down fruit wine. I kinda thought he looked a bit like a lost child. Was it possible that he was innocent and was simply worried about what would become of his uncle? If so, then the only suspect left would be Geimalos himself.

"This could be extremely important, Diel. If they hold a trial, would you be willing to testify as a witness?"

"Huh? Is it really that serious? Well, I guess I'd be fine with that. And I'm not the only one who heard it."

"Oh, was someone else with you?"

"Yeah, Labis was with me. And Lefreya and her attendant from Sym."

He wasn't actually from Sym. She was referring to Sanjura, who had mixed blood from the east and west.

As we stood there surprised, she shot us a smile.

"Lefreya doesn't get permission to meet with other nobles very often, but I'm just a merchant, so that Torst guy seems to be okay with me talking to her. That's why we were going on a walk around the garden. When I overheard those servants talking, I wondered why they were being all sneaky about it in

the middle of the day, but I finally get it now. I wanted to tell you before I brought it up with Melfried.”

“Thanks, Diel. I’m really grateful to hear that.”

If Leeheim had turned out to be the mastermind, it would have led to another round of troublesome quarreling with the nobles, but if the wrongdoing was Geimalos’s work alone, then we would likely be able to settle things with a lot less fuss. For now, though, we just had to leave things to Marstein.

“All right, can you go ahead and let Melfried know? And we’ll pass this along to the leading clan heads.”

“Yeah, got it. So, this is going to help you guys out, right?” Diel asked with an angelic smile. “I know this won’t be enough to erase what Lefreya and I did, but I hope it’ll make things at least a little easier for the people of the forest’s edge.”

“Huh? You’re still worrying about that, Diel?”

“Of course I am. It’s you guys who’ve been way too quick to forget it!” she replied with the smile still on her face, and then she turned to leave. “All right, see you around! Once the revival festival’s over, I’ll definitely come by your place in the post town!”

After watching her depart, Arishuna then gave us a deep bow. “I shall, be going as well. And I hope, that I can, someday atone, for my own crime.”

“Calling it a ‘crime’ is going way overboard, Arishuna.”

“You need not, be so giving. I wish, to form, a proper bond, with all of you.”

After that, Arishuna left as well, leaving just us people of the forest’s edge standing there.

“To think that they of all people would be the ones to expose the wrongdoings of a noble... Is this the result of all your efforts to forge new bonds?” Ai Fa asked.

“I’m not the only one who’s been forging them. The people of the forest’s edge as a whole have. Especially with folks like Lefreya.”

“But I get the feeling that you are the only one to have made a connection

with those two girls,” she said, turning away in a huff and glaring at me out of the corner of her eye. “Since you work as a chef at the forest’s edge, I can understand why you’re always making friends with women there... But even when you’re in town, you still only ever seem to associate yourself with young women.”

“That’s not true. The innkeepers are all men, and then you have the guys from the pot and cloth shops, and the craftsmen... Hey, are you listening?!”

Ai Fa elegantly walked away toward Jiza Ruu. Without really knowing anything about what was going on, Reina Ruu then asked me, “Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s nothing... But it sure has been an eventful day, hasn’t it? Even without that whole deal with Shin Ruu.”

“Yes. It will surely leave me with many memories.”

Since Diel and Arishuna had left, Sheera Ruu and Toor Deen approached us again. Yun Sudra was off standing by herself and observing everything with a smile, but all the other chefs wore serious expressions.

“Asuta, once the festival in town is over, will you come give cooking lessons at the Ruu settlement again?” Reina Ruu asked.

“Huh? Yeah, of course. We won’t have such an intense work schedule to worry about anymore at that point.”

“Thank you. And might we be able to accompany you when you come to examine new ingredients too?”

“Yes, I think that should be possible. From what Varkas said, it sounds like we’ll probably end up doing some sort of taste testing again.”

“Again, thank you. As terribly embarrassed as I am about how lacking my skills are, I still hope I can continue working together with you in the future.” Reina Ruu then bowed her head to me, and all the others followed suit a moment later.

Reina Ruu had always seemed to have the strongest drive to improve out of all of them, easily. Her desire to better herself almost felt like a sort of greed to me, and that made me smile when I remembered the time Ai Fa called me

greedy too.

“Same to you. But the revival festival isn’t over just yet. We’ve got to make it through the next three days first.”

“Right!” some energetic voices replied.

With that, the hectic twenty-eighth day of the violet month finally came to a close.

Chapter 4: Downfall and Rebirth

1

The next few days passed smoothly after that.

Though the festival only lasted for ten days, the outdoor restaurant had been open for over a month now. The number of customers we were seeing had doubled in that time, and we had made all sorts of changes along the way.

Our chefs had grown in number from eight all the way to fifteen, and we had gone from preparing four hundred meals to over a thousand. On the holidays, we had offered whole roast giba in the morning and then did business at night. We had served giba meat to many customers who had never had it before, such as the members of the Gamley Troupe, and the elder of the forest's edge, Granny Jiba, had even visited the post town and the Daleim lands.

The opening of the outdoor restaurant had also caused a shift in the distance between us and our customers. Now, many of our customers would jovially call out to the women of the forest's edge wearing their half-transparent veils and shawls as they wove their way through the seating and picked up the used tableware. And when the hunters acting as our guards were folks like Dan Rutim, Giran Ririn, and Ludo Ruu, the townsfolk would intermingle with them too. The outdoor restaurant had been created in the first place because Reina and Sheera Ruu wanted to get a closer view of how happy their customers were, and it definitely seemed to be fulfilling that purpose.

And even those who'd had their doubts about doing business in the post town had started taking part lately. That included folks like Jiza Ruu, Sufira Zaza, and Fei Beim. Jiza Ruu had even joined us when we were staying over in the Daleim lands and on the trip to the castle town. That meant the heir of one of the leading clan heads had gotten to experience what the townsfolk and nobles now thought of the people of the forest's edge, and how they looked at us.

There was certainly no shortage of folks out there like Dora's mother and

uncle who still hadn't accepted us, both in the Daleim lands and around the post town. Most of the folks visiting the stalls were travelers from other lands, while only a small number were actual citizens of Genos.

However, those who did come our way showed us no ill will and seemed very happy as they ate our giba cooking. We now saw lots of folks who didn't think of the people of the forest's edge as unreasonable barbarians, or that giba meat stank and was so tough that it was practically inedible. Instead they all smiled at us openly as they got drunk on fruit wine, always looking like they were really enjoying themselves.

Roughly half a year had passed since I first started selling giba cooking in the post town, and I certainly didn't have any complaints about how much we had managed to change things in that short time. It would have been fair to say that for the people of the forest's edge, this year—the eightieth since they had moved from the black forest to the base of Mount Morga—was proving to be a huge turning point in their history. And no matter how I looked at it, I had been an essential part of that revolution. Now that we had advanced this far with our business, it could carry on just fine without me, but if I hadn't come to the settlement at the forest's edge, none of this would have ever happened. Even if I couldn't have done anything without Ai Fa, Gazraan Rutim, and the Ruu clan accepting an outsider like me, there was no changing the fact that I had been the spark.

Of course, after everything I had done, I had no intention of letting my worries stop me now. I had come this far believing that the people of the forest's edge should learn the taste of delicious food, live more prosperous lives, and form proper bonds with the outside world. I had sworn that I would keep trying my hardest without holding back, believing I would prove to be medicine for everyone rather than poison, and wishing to live up to the trust Ai Fa and so many others had placed in me.

From what I had been told, Misha the White Sage had appeared in Sym during turbulent times and brought the people peace and order. It was possible that Sym in its current form never would have existed without him. They might not have ever learned how to make bricks from mud, and would have remained divided into seven tribes riding totos around the mountains and plains, with the

occasional clash between them. If they had remained violent barbarians, they might have eventually become a threat to Selva, Jagar, and Mahyudra.

There was no way I could ever do anything as grandiose as Misha had. Regardless of who he had been, I was nothing but a simple chef in training. Since culinary culture hadn't advanced all that far in this area, I had still earned a great deal of praise, but a chef would never be able to do something as monumental as conquering a nation. And it wasn't as if I wanted to do something like that in the first place. I just wanted to reach out as far as I could manage in order to bring joy to as many people as possible.

If anything, I was surprised by how far things had already gone. First, Ai Fa had accepted me as a member of her house. Then her tribe, the people of the forest's edge, had done the same. Soon the people of Genos, where they lived, had followed along. There were even numerous travelers visiting from Sym and Jagar that we had connected with. To put it more directly, I had met someone utterly irreplaceable—Ai Fa—and had been striving to live a good life here in this world she called home.

Maybe Misha had started out feeling much the same way. I hadn't been able to learn all the details through Neeya's song, but perhaps the first person he had met here in this land was the Rao chief's daughter. In order to save her from her predicament, he had used all his strength and brought peace to Sym, but even after everything he had done, he'd been forced to leave her... I couldn't help but think that that was how it had happened.

However, that was all just baseless daydreaming on my part. I was probably just getting over-imaginative, trying to see my own circumstances reflected in Misha's life. But it felt natural to dream about the sort of character who would appear in a minstrel's epic ballad, having lived hundreds of years ago, even if everything I dreamed up was undoubtedly pure fantasy and sentiment.

At any rate, I had made up my mind to live in the way I believed to be right. I wouldn't betray my own feelings or Ai Fa's trust... That was pretty much all that a guy like me could manage. And if I couldn't even pull that off, then there would be no point to me being here in this world. At least, that was how I saw it.

Ai Fa was precious to me, and so was the world she lived in. During this most recent major event—the sun god’s revival festival—I had heard the song of Misha the White Sage, and it had strengthened my resolve even more, so no matter what Neeya’s intentions might have been, hearing that tale was an incredibly precious memory for me.

With all of those thoughts and feelings filling my heart, I finally arrived at the last day of the violet month... The day of the downfall.

First, however, there was the thirtieth of the violet month, the day before the day of the downfall. This was two days after we had successfully completed our most recent castle town job.

Business in the post town had gone smoothly that day. All of the meals we had prepared sold out, and there hadn’t been any significant incidents worth mentioning. The seven women we had brought onboard for the revival festival period had fully acclimated to the work, and they were currently in the process of swiftly cleaning up.

“Our work will be finished for the time being tomorrow, won’t it? Thinking about it almost makes me feel a little lonely...” the Min woman who had been handling the giba hot pot stew stall alongside Ama Min Rutim said. I sent her a smile as I carried a hot metal tray over to a wagon, while taking care not to burn myself.

“It’s not as if we’re shutting down the stalls just because the month is changing. We’re only taking the first off, and then from the second of the silver month onward, we’ll open up again and see how things go. It would be a bit extreme to go right back to our original numbers immediately, so I was planning to ask a number of you to stay on.”

“Oh, is that so? In that case, I would love to keep helping out!”

“Ah, we would too,” the Gaaz and Ratsu women chimed in.

Fei Beim sullenly added, “Then everyone should be given a fair and equal chance. After all, the Beim and Dagora still need to properly observe where this business is leading us.”

“That’s true. Let’s go with the same lineup we’ve had up till now for the first day, then after that we can put together a fair rotation schedule. Everyone under the Ruu, you should consult with Reina and Sheera Ruu.”

“Right,” they replied with nods and smiles. The sturdy women of the forest’s edge seemed to be doing just fine in terms of stamina, so as long as mental exhaustion didn’t become an issue, I felt reassured that I didn’t have anything to worry about on that front.

“Well then, let’s head back to the forest’s edge now. Everyone, please take care of your individual tasks like always.”

With the hunters guarding us, we then set off down the bustling path through town. However, we didn’t make it more than a few steps before Ai Fa called out, “Wait. Ludo Ruu, look over there.”

“Hmm? Ah, yeah, that does seem a bit off. Guess we should check it out to be on the safe side.”

I had no idea what they had seen, but Ludo Ruu whispered something to Darmu Ruu and then disappeared into the crowd. Ai Fa went to follow after him, but then she turned my way with a furrowed brow. It looked like she was torn between following Ludo Ruu and staying by my side.

“What is it? I could go with you, if that would make things easier for you.”

“Hmm... There shouldn’t be any danger... Very well, come along.”

After entrusting the stall to Fei Beim, I went ahead and followed after Ai Fa. Ludo Ruu had been heading in the direction of the Gamley Troupe’s tent, and if this had something to do with those guys, Ai Fa and I weren’t going to just ignore it.

However, Ai Fa headed not toward the tent’s entrance, but rather toward an area off to the side, half-hidden by the thicket. Ludo Ruu had already stepped into the foliage, and there looked to be someone else standing there too. Apparently, that person was the one who had caught Ai Fa’s and Ludo Ruu’s attention.

“I’m amazed you spotted them through such a huge crowd. That’s a hunter’s eyesight for you, I suppose,” I remarked, only for Ai Fa to silently move into the

thicket. An unfamiliar person was there, shifting around under the light streaming down from above, and they had a small cart next to them.

“Hey, what are you up to?” Ludo Ruu asked after getting there first, making the person in question turn in shock to face him. They had been trying to untie the leather cords binding one of the seams in the tent closed. Sure enough, that was definitely suspicious.

“Huh? Wh-Who, me? I was just trying to get inside the tent...”

I had definitely never seen this person before. They were about as tall as me or Ai Fa and quite lanky. Their medium-length brown hair was tied in the back, their skin was pale, and they had light brown eyes. They might have been in their twenties, or maybe they were younger. It was hard to tell. Their long face had freckles like Roy’s, and they wore shabby cloth attire. Their eyes were quite big and wide, and they had a rather charming face. Aside from being excessively slender, they didn’t really have any standout traits to note. That is, until I heard their voice and realized I was looking at a woman.

“Y-You don’t have to worry, I swear. I’m, well, an assistant to the troupe. If you’re worried that I might be lying, you can ask the folks inside,” the girl said timidly. As she was wearing men’s clothing, her chest looked totally flat. She had narrow, sloping shoulders and a bent back. Her posture was terrible. Looking at her overall appearance, I almost couldn’t believe this was a young woman, but her voice was undoubtedly feminine. With that in mind, it was hard to imagine the gentle curves of her face belonging to anyone but a girl.

“From what I’ve heard, the Gamleys only have thirteen performers in total. Did they have other companions too...? Even if that’s true, though, we can’t just overlook your luggage there,” Ludo Ruu said, pointing at the cart behind her, his tone even lighter and more easygoing than usual.

It was a small, crude cart, rectangular in shape, without any sort of covering over the top. It had two big wheels and a single totos attached at the front. Also, there was a huge cloth bag loaded on it, which appeared to be squirming. Something big was in there. Actually, it looked just big enough to hold a human. But the mouth of the bag was bound shut with a vine, so I couldn’t see inside.

“That’s not a person in there, right? Or if it’s a giba instead, we wouldn’t be

able to turn a blind eye to that either,” Ludo Ruu said while tapping on the handle of the blade at his hip. “I know the Gamleys were wanting to capture a giba, but I doubt they could’ve gotten permission from the lord of the land already, so if you went sneaking into the forest of Morga without us knowing, well, that’s not something we can let slide.”

“Th-That’s not it, not at all! It’s not a giba! This is just a huge misunderstanding!”

“Then what is it? If you’ve got that Dilo guy stuffed in there, I’ll have a good, long laugh about it.”

“I-It isn’t Dilo. They’re mundt.”

“Mundt?” I repeated at the same time as Ludo Ruu. That was the name of a type of carrion-eating pest local to the area.

“Yes, carrion-eating mundt. You know this troupe keeps a gaaje leopard and an algura silver lion, right? If we just keep feeding them kimyuus and karon meat day in and day out, it would cost far too much, and they’re forbidden from leaving the tent according to the laws of the town... They could grow weak if we don’t fetch fresh entrails and the like for them. That’s why we need to bring them live prey from nearby every now and then.”

“Mundt, huh...?”

“R-Right! I-I didn’t go anywhere near the forest of Morga! We set a trap in the depths of the thicket to catch mundt late at night! We won’t head into the forest of Morga until Neeya gets permission from the nobles, and the troupe leader even gave us a firm warning not to.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. Sorry, but could I check to see what’s inside just to be safe? The leading clan heads don’t really trust that leader of yours enough for me to let you go without being sure.”

In response, the girl said, “Okay...” with her eyebrows helplessly drooping as she dropped her resistance and reached out toward the cart. Those long, slender fingers of hers skillfully undid the vine...and then a vicious-looking snout suddenly protruded from inside.

The snout looked a bit smooshed, like that of a pit bull terrier. Its face was

square with triangular ears, its neck was short and sturdy-looking, and its tiny eyes were blazing with fury. The fur all over its body was pale brown, and looked like it had been trimmed short with barber's clippers. There was a vine wrapped around its smooshed snout, so it wasn't even able to let out so much as a yelp, but even still, the vicious-looking beast was flailing its short neck about as hard as it could.

This was my first time ever seeing a mundt, but it really did look just like Ai Fa had described. Then another mundt, similar in appearance, managed to struggle enough to jam its head out as well. Both of them were around a meter long and had strangely round bodies, with their four limbs looking oddly thin in comparison. They were truly unlike anything I had ever seen before, as if someone had attached a deer's legs to a pig's body.

"Yep, those are definitely mundt. Sorry for doubting you. As a person of the forest's edge and the youngest son of the main Ruu house, I, Ludo Ruu, apologize for my rudeness," Ludo Ruu said with a bow, not actually looking at all ashamed.

The girl finally seemed to relax and smiled back. "Ah, no, I'm just glad the misunderstanding got cleared up. For a second, I thought I was done for. I'm dripping with cold sweat now."

"Isn't that overstating it a bit? You could've run away from me and Ai Fa easily enough, right? You may be a woman, but you seem crazy strong."

"That's not true at all. I'm nothing but a worthless freeloader," the girl said with a grin, casually shoving the mundt heads back into the bag with one hand, then tying it up again.

As she stared at the girl's face from the side, Ai Fa suddenly remarked, "Ah... I thought I recognized you from somewhere. You're the one who was wearing that strange armor... The person they called Rolo the knight king."

Her words completely took me aback. However, the girl looked even more thrown for a loop than I was. The loose smile she wore remained in place, but she was going quite pale as she slowly turned Ai Fa's way.

"Wh-Wh-Whatever do you mean? I-I'm just an assistant, so..."

“There’s no need to try to fool me. Your performance was quite splendid.”

To that, the girl screamed, “Gyah!” as she cradled her head, her freckled face now a deep crimson. “Please, please stop! Y-You saw me perform?! Why must I be shamed so?!”

“It is no shame. That’s simply your job, isn’t it?” Ai Fa pressed further with a tilt of her head.

The girl—Rolo the knight king, minus her knightly armor—collapsed with a look of utter hopelessness. “Wh-Why do you think I hide my face?! Ahhh, how incredibly embarrassing! All I’m good for is that ridiculous act! If that upsets you, then by all means, go right ahead and stone me!”

“I’m telling you, it was a splendid performance. What’s the matter with you?”

“These people are all such weirdos...” Ludo Ruu remarked in astonishment, his eyes open wide. “Anyway, I’ve seen enough to know you’re keeping your promise to us. Sorry for getting in the way of your work. Just go ahead and feed that leopard and lion their meal.”

Despite what he had said, Rolo didn’t rise to her feet, so we just went ahead and left.

Back on the street, the group that hadn’t been assigned to work were waiting there with two of the wagons. Once we reunited with them, we gave our report to Darmu Ruu, then started walking down the road once more.

“I never would have suspected that woman was Rolo. That’s got to be a pretty rough act to perform, getting kicked and thrown about by Doga and the black ape,” I said to Ai Fa.

“Yes, she must have trained extensively. She might even be able to fight Shin Ruu on equal terms, with a little luck.”

“Huh? That scrawny woman? But Shin Ruu’s about as strong as Melfried now, right? That would make her as strong as Jiza Ruu was not that long ago...”

“I cannot say with certainty. But I believe she is indeed about that strong. They really are a mysterious lot...” Ai Fa said, gently bringing her hand up to her chest. She was still wearing bandages to be on the safe side, but the day when

she would be fully healed was finally close. “I want to start training again soon... I need to, in order to settle things with Lem Dom and determine her fate as well.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

Ai Fa had somehow grown more feminine lately, but once she returned to her training as a hunter, she would surely regain her previous sharpness. It wasn’t as if the difference was all that obvious, but her movements definitely seemed to have grown gentler, and at times she even looked like an ordinary woman.

“What are you staring at me for?”

“Oh, I was just thinking that I love you both ways,” I replied. A moment later, though, I was shocked when I realized what I had just said. “Ack, I just blurted out what I was thinking!”

Ai Fa’s face went every bit as red as Rolo’s had, and then she gave me a smack on the back of the head. Everyone around us looked rather surprised, so my words must have only reached Ai Fa’s ears. She’d hit me hard enough for it to feel like I’d been whipped, but it was still fortunate for both Ai Fa and myself that I hadn’t broadcast my embarrassing words to the whole street.

2

It was now the night of the thirtieth of the violet month, after we had discovered Rolo the knight king’s identity and Ai Fa had slapped me on the back of the head. As it was the day before a holiday, we were once again spending the night at Dora’s house in the Daleim lands.

Our group included five chefs—myself, Rimee Ruu, Ama Min Rutim, Toor Deen, and Yun Sudra—and five guards including Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, Gazraan Rutim, Dan Rutim, and Giran Ririn, adding up to ten in total. We were able to reduce our numbers since Granny Jiba wasn’t with us this time, though we still needed at least this many in order to hand out whole roast giba from five stalls tomorrow morning.

However, an even larger crowd from the forest’s edge would be visiting Dora’s house tomorrow night. After we finished our nighttime business and our

ten long days of work were over, we were going to throw a party at Dora's house, with a ton of people invited, including Granny Jiba.

Tomorrow was the day of the downfall, the final day of the year, or what we called New Year's Eve back in my old world. Folks would spend the whole night celebrating the sun god's revival, and then everyone in town would take the following day off, for the sun god's return. And so, we'd decided that the people of the forest's edge would also try following the traditions of Genos and stay over at Dora's place that night.

Granny Jiba had been the strongest proponent of this plan, and had gotten permission for it from Donda Ruu. It would be dangerous to spend the night in the post town with so many outsiders around, but a celebration in the Daleim lands was just barely within the range of things he could tolerate. It was unlikely that we were going to have an easy time getting the guards who would be accompanying us—which included Jiza Ruu—to loosen up and enjoy themselves, but I was sure they would still find some kind of meaning in spending such a long evening with the folks from the Daleim lands regardless.

"Our work in town is mostly finished as of today! All our extra hires are gonna be heading over to the post town for the next while, so we should have plenty of beds to spare. That means you can go ahead and bring along as many folks as you want!" Dora said while eating giba cooking together with us for the third time. He had harvested all the vegetables he could, and they were now safely piled up in his storehouse. With that done, he would be taking it easy till midway through the silver month and preparing for the coming rainy season, when he would be planting fresh seedlings.

"There's going to be a shortage of tarapa and tino and the like pretty soon, but there's also going to be a decline in the number of folks making merry about the post town, so you should be able to take it easy for a while too."

"Right. It's important to strike a balance."

This part of the world didn't have four distinct seasons, and Genos didn't celebrate any big events aside from the revival festival, so nothing else on the calendar would ever be likely to match the upheaval of the last several days. It was certainly never boring—I didn't have time to be bored— but I would still

welcome a change of pace.

“So, could we stop by the settlement at the forest’s edge sometime during the silver month as well? It would be nice to have a chance to visit again, if that would be all right.”

“Yeah. Rimee would love that, and our old man is soft on her, so I can’t imagine him saying no at this point,” Ludo Ruu replied, looking just as excited as Rimee Ruu and Tara were.

“No doubt that will be happening at the Ruu settlement? In that case, I would like to be invited for dinner as well,” Gazraan Rutim chimed in.

Dora smiled at him. “We’d be happy to have you and Dan Rutim there as well! I should say, you’re a remarkably calm and composed fellow. And far brighter than anyone I know from town.”

“That’s not...” Gazraan Rutim started to reply, only to be cut off by his father’s laughter.

“Gazraan is my pride and joy! But you raised your boys quite well too!”

“Yes, though they still have some things to learn.”

The two sons in question were a bit younger than Gazraan Rutim. However, they were both kind young men as well, and seemed to get along well with the Rutim clan head. They had previously expressed an interest in interacting with Jiza Ruu more too. The two of them seemed to be of a similar mind to Gazraan Rutim, in terms of having a strong interest in the outside world.

This was the first time Ama Min Rutim and Yun Sudra had come here with us, but they seemed to be getting along great with the wives of the family, while Toor Deen fit in just fine with Rimee Ruu and Tara. Each time we did this, the boundaries between us and Dora’s family came down more and more.

But while all that was going on, I noticed Dora’s mother was just silently eating her meal.

“How’s the food today? These dishes are quite popular in the post town.”

She shot me an unfriendly glare. Today’s menu included a boiled tarapa dish and deep-fried giba sirloin. Both of them were daily specials at the stalls.

“Why is this tarapa so sweet...? You lot buy big sour tarapa, don’t you?”

“We do, yeah. So, we finely mince a bunch of aria and sauté it before boiling, and we also add fruit wine at that point. That draws out the vegetables’ natural sweetness better than using sugar.”

“I’m not familiar with this vegetable...”

“Ah, that’s called ma pula. It’s apparently grown in Jagar and the western part of Selva. It’s a relative of pula, but it isn’t bitter.”

We ultimately didn’t touch on the matter of the giba meat, but tonight she had actually eaten a portion of giba cooking her granddaughter had served her. Dora’s uncle was also biting into the deep-fried sirloin with a frown. That alone was enough to make me so happy I felt a lump in my throat.

“What’s tomorrow’s party going to be like?” Giran Ririn asked nobody in particular. Dora was still having a friendly chat with Dan Rutim, so his older son turned to answer in his place.

“It’s nothing all that special. We’ll light a fire outside, enjoy a light meal and some fruit wine, and await the sun god’s revival. Oh, that means waiting for the first sun of the new year to shine across the land.”

“My! You’re saying we’re going to stay up without sleep all the way until morning?”

“Some people will sleep for a little while, but everyone wakes up before the break of dawn. After all, the whole next day is set aside for rest.”

“Hmm... Folks will carry on real late at weddings and festivals of the hunt at the forest’s edge too, but I’ve never heard of any that lasted until morning. Perhaps we should come up with a rotation so that we don’t all fall asleep at once.”

“Just leave the planning to Jiza Ruu and Gazraan! As long as there’s fruit wine, I can stay up as long as I need!” Dan Rutim said, making Giran Ririn break out in a happy grin.

“Naturally, I’ve got no intention of going to sleep either if that’s how it’s done. But if everyone drifts off except for you and I, I’m sure Donda Ruu is going to

chew us out later.”

“Yeah, and young folks seem to have this strange tendency to drink themselves into unconsciousness!”

Wasn’t it more like the two of them just had an excessively high tolerance for alcohol? Anyway, the women from Dora’s house were also excitedly giggling to each other.

“Still, the people of the forest’s edge don’t celebrate the sun god’s revival, right? Even though I’ve heard they celebrate the beginning and end of each year in Jagar too,” the younger son interjected.

“Hmm?” Dan Rutim questioned with a tilt of his head. “It’s been eighty years now since the people of the forest’s edge called the black forest of Jagar home, and even back then we didn’t have any interaction with folks from outside of the forest, so we never had any opportunities to pick up the customs of Jagar.”

“That’s so strange, living completely isolated from the outside world... I don’t mean this in a bad way, but it almost makes you sound like the famed savages of Morga.”

“The red savages of Morga, huh? You know, they’re the one thing I’ve never laid eyes on.”

“Huh? Does that mean you’ve seen giant madarama snakes and varb wolves?”

“I’ve spied giant madarama snakes slithering along the tops of cliffs several times before. And I’m actually friends with a varb wolf!” Dan Rutim said while puffing up his chest as the sons’ eyes shone with curiosity.

I’d had a chance encounter with an injured madarama snake that had been washed down the Lanto river myself, but normally the beasts of Morga were treated like legendary creatures, never to be seen by human eyes.

And so, Dan Rutim brought the night’s dinner to a close with the tale of the two times he had encountered a varb wolf. The story of how the beast with pure white fur had saved him twice was so fantastical that it seemed to have been cut from the same cloth as Neeya’s song about Misha.

After that, we were once again allotted one room for the men to sleep in, and a second for the women. Before we turned in, however, Ludo Ruu had something to report. After we had finished up with business and returned to the settlement for the day, a messenger from Melfried had arrived for Donda Ruu. I had already basically heard what the message said from Rimee Ruu on the way to Dora's place, but it wasn't an appropriate topic for the dinner table, so the official report had been delayed till now.

"That noble, Geimalos, has finally recovered enough to speak, and apparently, he's confessed everything about his crimes. It seems he had no confidence in his ability to win against a hunter from the forest's edge, so when the match was proposed, he felt that he was in a lot of trouble. But he couldn't just turn tail and run either, so that's why he dirtied his hands with that trick."

At this point, the only ones left in the room to hear about this were me, Ai Fa, and Gazraan Rutim.

"Hmm..." Ai Fa muttered with a furrowed brow. "Aren't swordsmen and knights supposed to value honor and pride in the same way we hunters do? I seem to recall Granny Jiba telling me so."

"Yeah, but his pride took an unfortunate turn here. He decided that rather than losing or withdrawing, using a dirty trick to win was the most pride-preserving outcome he could hope for."

"I can't understand him at all. Even if he had managed to win without anyone ever learning of his wrongdoing, how could he possibly be happy with that?"

"Don't ask me. At any rate, he's apparently lost his position as head of those knights. But, well, it seems like he'll never be able to hold a sword again after taking that blow from Shin Ruu anyway."

"It seems he has suffered a broken nose and left arm, and injured his neck muscles terribly as well. Even if it would take quite some time, a hunter from the forest's edge could eventually recover from those injuries, but a noble from the castle town must lack the necessary spirit," Gazraan Rutim calmly added, surprisingly not sounding like he was looking down on the man. "And since he's lost his position, he will no longer have any authority or power. From what I've observed, nobles seem to value not only bloodlines but also their official posts

to an extreme degree. Even Polarth had no real authority as a noble until he helped take down Cyclaeus...and Cyclaeus's brother Ciluel committed his villainous acts to grab hold of power as well."

"Ah, I see. It's true that Geimalos, Polarth, and Ciluel are all second and third sons of the houses of counts."

That was why Ciluel had ended up resorting to the vile act of assassination in order to become the leader of the militia, while Geimalos had dug his own grave with his efforts to protect his position. Looking at it that way, it seemed somehow ironic that Polarth had seen the most success out of the three, as he had always sought to elevate the strength and standing of the whole house of Daleim rather than gain a post for himself.

"It's important for people to live with the right kind of pride in their hearts. That Polarth man seems easygoing and even childish in some ways, but he is without a doubt a trustworthy noble," Ai Fa solemnly stated, apparently thinking the same thing as me.

"Duke Genos also said he wants to arrange a reconciliation, supposedly," Gazraan Rutim continued.

"Reconciliation?"

"Yes. There's no way Geimalos can make this better with words, but apparently they think the house of Saturas needs to offer an apology to the people of the forest's edge for the crimes one of their own committed against us. There's also the quarrel between Reina Ruu and Leeheim to consider. After all, he was the one who picked Geimalos as Shin Ruu's opponent for the match in the first place. That's why the duke wants to create an opportunity for both parties to reconcile with each other, so there won't be any ill will going forward."

So that was the end result Duke Marstein Genos was aiming for. It was possible that even Geimalos's little trick had ultimately worked out exactly how the duke had wanted.

"Well, this is a problem between the Ruu clan and the nobles. But that noble first laid eyes on Reina when she was working with you, Asuta, on one of your jobs in the castle town, so I guess the Fa clan has something to do with this too.

And we have no way of knowing what might happen to your business in the post town if we make enemies of those Saturas folks,” Ludo Ruu said.

“Yeah. If I’m asked to come along, then of course I’d be happy to do so... You don’t mind, do you, Ai Fa?”

“I am in complete agreement with you on this matter, of course... But when exactly would that be? I’m going to need to begin training to regain my strength as a hunter soon, and the Ruu clan’s break period is almost over as well, correct?”

“Yeah. It’s lasted about half a month as of today. It’ll be a while still before the giba start coming out in droves again, but it would definitely be best to get this hassle out of the way sooner rather than later.”

With that said, we wouldn’t be able to decide on a date until the revival festival wrapped up. Then there was also the matter of heading to the castle town to inspect the new ingredients, so even if things settled down with our business for a while, we still had a lot ahead of us.

“We don’t know what’ll happen with those traveling performers wanting to capture a giba either. It all sounds like a huge pain,” Ludo Ruu said before giving a big yawn. “But, well, finishing up work and the party tomorrow comes first. It’s gonna be an early morning, so we should get some sleep, right?”

“True. Thanks for everything, Ludo Ruu. Goodnight, Ai Fa,” I said, since the mood somehow didn’t seem right for standing around chatting tonight.

After a moment, Ai Fa nodded back. “Same to you.”

She headed over to the left door while I opened the right, and we each retired to our respective bedrooms. Dan Rutim and the other men were already snoring away inside. There was bedding laid out on the floor, and they were all sleeping in a huddle.

“Each and every day has been full of so much meaning...” Gazraan Rutim said as he was lying down on the bedding.

I stretched out similarly and nodded to him. “Yeah. I’d say just sleeping in the same room as you like this is an experience to remember for me too.”

“That’s true. I’m very much in agreement.” As he lay facing upward, Gazraan Rutim broke out in a bashful smile. “All that remains is handing out giba meat in the post town tomorrow morning, doing business in the evening, and the party in the Daleim lands at night... After that, the revival festival will come to an end.”

“Yeah. It’s strange. It feels like the whole thing has gone by in a flash, but also the complete opposite.”

At any rate, these last several days had been precious and meaningful. Getting all sentimental about it would have to wait till tomorrow night, but there was a special feel in the air right now, like when you were getting ready to sleep on a school trip.

“The clan head meeting will be held in the next blue month, and if the clan heads all approve of your business in the post town...we’ll be able to enjoy this again next year, won’t we?”

“Right, and I want to do whatever it takes to earn their approval. Oh yeah, and speaking of the next clan head meeting, you’ll be taking part, right?”

“Of course. I *am* the head of the Rutim clan,” Gazraan Rutim responded with a gentle smile, illuminated by the blue moonlight. Ludo Ruu, meanwhile, had drifted off right away, creating a trio of snoring hunters. “I am bracing myself as well, having become clan head at a time when we people of the forest’s edge are being confronted with so much change. I intend to give it everything I have, for the Rutim, of course, and for our parent clan, the Ruu, and also our friends, the Fa...and for all of our comrades at the forest’s edge.”

“I’m sure you’ll be a great clan head, just like Dan Rutim. Ai Fa and I will be doing our best too, as friends of the Rutim.”

The conversation naturally took a serious turn when it was just me and Gazraan Rutim, but it felt a bit embarrassing that it ended up on the two of us confirming how we considered one another to be important friends. My earlier words weren’t just lip service, though. I really did consider the time I spent with Gazraan Rutim to be precious.

Things fell silent for a while after that, and I started to wonder if he had drifted off to sleep, only for his calm voice to quietly speak up through the

darkness again.

“Asuta, there’s something I wish to confide to you... Could I ask that you and Ai Fa keep it to yourselves?”

“Of course I’ll keep your secret. What is it?”

“Thank you. Even among the Rutim clan, this is something I’ve only spoken about to the members of the main house...” He hesitated for a moment, but then he whispered, “You see, Ama Min may be with child.”

My eyes shot open wide at that, and I quickly looked over at him.

“I cannot say for certain just yet, and there is still a danger of something going wrong at this stage. That is why I’m asking that you don’t tell anyone else for the time being.”

“O-Of course I won’t. Er, is it still too early to congratulate you?”

“Yes. I would appreciate it if you would save that for further down the line,” Gazraan Rutim said while turning my way with a smile still on his face. “But with that in mind, Ama Min will likely no longer be able to help you with your work in the post town in the not-so-distant future. It’s been a bit of a worry for her.”

“There’s no helping that. And it’s really no big deal at all compared to being blessed with a child,” I happily replied, breaking out in a smile of my own. “If it turns out to be true, you’ll end up with a kid around the same age as Li Sudra’s. I know the Sudra and Rutim homes are kinda far apart, but you seem like you get along, so that should be even more reason to be happy.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“I guess there would be a two-year gap between your kid and Kota Ruu from the Ruu clan, then... But give them a couple decades, and Kota Ruu and your kid will become great clan heads too, just like Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim, or you and Jiza Ruu.”

“You sure are thinking far ahead, Asuta... Still, it’s such a wonderful thought that it’s dazzling.”

Assuming Li Sudra’s child would be born healthy, they would all be close in age to Aimu Fou from the Fou clan. The Fou and Sudra were located pretty

close to each other and had a great deal of interaction, so they were sure to get along like Raielfam Sudra and Baadu Fou did now.

And so, the history of the people of the forest's edge would continue onward. Those of us who were alive now had to work our hardest in order to forge a path to a bright future for the little ones. Just like Granny Jiba and Raa Rutim had done, and Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim had after them. Somebody needed to act as a bridge to the next generation and help to shape their world.

I felt unable to sit still at this point, so I went ahead and sat up atop the bedding.

"Is something the matter?" Gazraan Rutim asked.

"No, I'm just feeling wide awake now, so I was thinking I'd go get a drink of water or something."

"In that case, allow me to join you."

"It's not like I'll be leaving the house, so no need to worry. Please get some rest, Gazraan Rutim."

With that, I got up and exited the room, relying on the light of the moon. Then, with a faint creak, I closed the wooden door.

As I stood there in the dark, not even ten seconds passed before the neighboring bedroom door swung open.

"So it was you after all. What is it?"

The one to appear from inside and ask that was Ai Fa. Feeling satisfied with this outcome, I went ahead and smiled at her in the dark. Given how good my clan head's vision was, she surely would be able to make out my expression, even when it was this dark.

"You heard the sound of the door opening and closing, didn't you? That's a hunter of the forest's edge for you."

"Did you have some business with me? Is it about Ama Min Rutim?" Ai Fa asked, closing the door behind her and standing in front of me.

As I tried to make out her expression through the darkness, I nodded back. "Yeah. Did you hear about it from Ama Min Rutim herself?"

“Indeed. And she started by telling me Gazraan Rutim intended to share the news with you tonight. However, she did say that nothing is certain just yet.”

“Right. Let’s just pray that it does turn out to be true.”

Ai Fa tilted her head questioningly. “By the way, Asuta, why are you narrowing your eyes like that? If you’re tired, then you should get to sleep.”

“It’s just that I can’t see your face that well. My night vision isn’t as good as yours.”

Ai Fa shrugged and took several steps down the hall. There was a window on the wall opposite the door, where moonlight was streaming in. Now I could see Ai Fa standing there with her blonde hair down and wearing an incredibly calm expression.

“Is this satisfactory?”

“Yeah,” I replied, walking over to Ai Fa.

I stopped when we were only about thirty centimeters apart. If anyone were to pass by, they would probably be surprised and wonder what we were getting up to out here in the dark. Even so, this was something important that we had to do.

“I just feel uneasy when I try to go to sleep without talking to you first, Ai Fa.”

“There’s no point in saying what I already know...” Ai Fa said, a little meanly, but then she smiled with a gentle shine in her blue eyes.



“We’ll only be working together as we have been for one more day.”

“Yeah, true.”

“There may be some troublesome things that need to be done beyond that, but all you can do is focus on the tasks in front of you now.”

“You’ve got that right. It may be a little weird to say this, but it’s been so reassuring to have you on guard duty while you’ve been injured, and it’s made me really happy too. The fact that I’ve been able to spend all this time with you means a lot to me.”

“You didn’t need to say that first part. It would have worried me greatly to leave guard duty to someone else at a time like this as well,” Ai Fa said, gently brushing aside the bangs dangling down over her forehead. “It was simply the forest’s guidance that I was injured... We have been quite fortunate.”

“Yeah.”

We had decided not to touch one another unnecessarily, but for the past several days, I had spent more time close to Ai Fa than ever before, and I had been able to speak freely about my feelings, not lying or hiding a thing. I really did feel blessed.

“I’ll be counting on you during our last day of work too. We’ll be rushing all over the place with everyone afterward, so get your rest now while you can.”

“Right,” Ai Fa replied, her smile brimming with affection.

And so, that was how we readied ourselves to face the coming days of the sun god’s downfall and return, late at night on the thirtieth of the violet month.

3

It was now the morning of the day of the downfall.

After traveling from Dora’s house to the post town, we were now preparing to hand out our whole roast giba from five stalls.

Of the five giba, two were young ones while the others were full-grown dressed carcasses. Before long, our reinforcements from the settlement at the

forest's edge arrived. We divided ourselves up into pairs with them and got to work cooking the giba.

The chefs who had joined us included Reina Ruu, Vina Ruu, Lala Ruu, Morun Rutim, and Fei Beim. Toor Deen had been acting in a support role for me up until now, but today I had her team up with Vina Ruu instead, and then I paired up with Fei Beim. Since we weren't actually doing business at the moment, there didn't need to be any boundaries between the small clans and the Ruu, which allowed us to deploy everyone so that each pair would be properly balanced. For example, the inexperienced Yun Sudra was partnered with Reina Ruu. The two of them made a pretty novel set.

On top of that, we even had Dari Sauti coming from the Sauti settlement to observe today. There was a young woman driving his wagon, but there were no guards anywhere to be seen. Perhaps he didn't want to bring along any of the men from his area, who were probably getting ready to go out and hunt when the sun hit its peak right now.

With his left arm still held in a sling, Dari Sauti calmly smiled at us and said, "My right arm alone should be all I need to handle any ruffians from around town."

Besides, the people who had joined us from the Ruu clan also included several hunters, so there was no need for the Sauti to provide guards of their own. With the five hunters, led by Jiza Ruu, added to Ludo Ruu and the others who had been with us last night, we had ten guards in total. It was hard to imagine anyone coming after us with a lineup like that.

Dari Sauti stood alongside Jiza Ruu and Sufira Zaza, and the trio of a leading clan head, an heir to the same post, and the youngest daughter of yet another leading clan head watched over us as we worked. Though the townsfolk would have no way of knowing, they were quite a distinguished group.

Furthermore, we finally had Yun Sudra and Fei Beim from the smaller clans participating. Since Toor Deen and I had been coming here for a long time, the clans in our area were already fully aware of the state of the post town, but it was still important for them to hear directly from their own clan members. With that in mind, I wanted to extend the opportunity to the Fou and Ran as well, as

they hadn't ever participated in our business.

In another month, all the clans in the area around the Fa would enter into a break period. That would be the perfect chance to ask them to join our business in the post town. The plan was to keep doing the outdoor restaurant even after the revival festival ended, so we were going to need more personnel than in the past. But, since it didn't require cooking skills to work the restaurant, we could more easily swap people in and out.

For now, though, I needed to focus on the work in front of me. With each holiday that went by, the town seemed to get more and more lively. Today, when they handed out fruit wine at the upper fifth hour, I saw a whole bunch of familiar faces in the crowd, such as the members of Dora's household, the bodyguard Zasshuma, the cloth and pot sellers, and even Myme and Mikel.

"Hey there. Seems that Geimalos guy finally admitted to his crimes. It's causing a bit of a commotion over in the castle town," Zasshuma told me with a grin, well informed as always. Ever since returning to Genos, he had been visiting our stalls daily and informing us of what was going on. "It's pretty rare for skilled swordsmen to come out of a peaceful place like Genos, and Geimalos had an especially impressive reputation among those who did. To think a guy like that would get so scared that he'd resort to such a dishonorable trick... Still, if you asked me to face a hunter from the forest's edge one on one, I'd turn you down right from the start." I was surprised that he would say such a thing, considering that from what I had heard, bodyguards who received official recognition from the kingdom of Selva were all supposed to be strong, fearless combatants. "At any rate, the noble house of Saturas owes the people of the forest's edge big-time at this point. Now, though, it's going to be important for everyone to come to terms with one another, or all the effort everyone's been putting in will go to waste."

"That's true. I really hope the leading clan heads can talk things through and reach a peaceful resolution."

As we were having our talk, I was finishing up with whole-roasting the giba. Three of them had only lasted thirty minutes or so before, so what was it going to be like today? We were offering five this time, but I could still see them going just as quickly. That was just how big the crowd gathering around us was.

From there, we cut off the meat and served it up to the townsfolk just like before, and before long, a familiar group appeared: the Gamley Troupe.

“Hey there. We’ve still got plenty left here today,” I said.

Pino was standing beside my stall, staring at me with a look that was hard to read in her black eyes. “Ah, well...would it perhaps be possible for us to have some as well?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Normally we pay you in coins, but today you’re handing it out for free as an act of charity, right? I’m just wondering if we’re allowed to eat it too.” Even after hearing that, I still couldn’t figure out what she was getting at. However, Pino’s gaze then shifted over to Ai Fa next to me. “For example, you still take offense to how our blockheaded minstrel handles himself, right? But that dunce may as well be family to us, so we can’t just turn a blind eye to that.”

“It’s true that I have not forgiven how that man acted... If you take issue with that, then I suppose you should not approach me either.”

“That’s not it. Neeya was a real idiot, and it’s only natural you got angry at him,” Pino said, hiding her mouth behind the sleeves of her furisode-like outfit. Her beautiful eyebrows, which looked almost like streaks of ink, drooped in a pained manner. “But if you came to hate us too by association, it wouldn’t be right for us to just casually drop by and grab some free giba meat. It’s not the same as if we were paying coins as customers.”

“That’s quite an admirable position to take,” Ai Fa replied, her eyes opening rather wide in surprise. “I’ve always thought of you as being rather stubborn, but the way you’re speaking now seems much more appropriate for the sort of girl you appear to be.”

“Thanks for saying so. I’ve known old man Rai longer than Neeya, so I know how dangerous it can be to read someone’s fate. If old man Rai had known just how foolish that blockhead really was, he never would have told him about what he saw.”

After staring at Pino’s small figure for a bit, Ai Fa gave a sigh. “Jiza Ruu has said that he considers you trustworthy. It’s no small thing for someone from

town to earn such an appraisal from him. As such, I can only believe that it must be true, and I have no intention of blaming such a person for the acts of someone close to her.”

“I’m nothing special. Still, you’re saying that’s enough for you to not let your hatred for Neeya spread to me too?”

“Of course. If you tried to insist that there was nothing wrong with how he acted, though, that would be a different story.”

Pino continued staring at Ai Fa, the same expression on her face as before. Meanwhile, Doga the strongman and Nachara the flute player were standing nearby, at the edge of the road.

“So that’s that. Please feel free to go ahead and take some giba meat. If you wait too long, everyone else will eat it up first,” I called out, finally getting Pino to smile at me. It wasn’t the same sort of smirk as always either. It was a strangely gentle expression that called to mind a Buddha statue.



“Thanks. But let me just say, when Ai Fa said that we’re ‘from town,’ that was a little off the mark.”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. As you can see, we don’t live in any town; we’re always drifting from place to place. I’m sure the townsfolk wouldn’t want to get lumped together with good-for-nothings like us.”

“Hmm... But the townsfolk do not seem to look down on your people,” Ai Fa noted.

“That’s thanks to the welcoming atmosphere of the festival. If not for that, we’d be seen as vagabonds. The type of people kids would throw stones at. So we’re just as shunned and despised as the people of the forest’s edge once were.” Pino’s mysterious smile vanished as she giggled. “We’re nothing but fools who cast aside the norms and customs of townsfolk in order to live freely. If everyone the world over acted like us, you’d never be able to maintain a kingdom. That’s why I can’t accept you treating us like respectable citizens.”

“But...”

“It’s fine. We chose this way of life because we wanted to, so we don’t have any hard feelings about it. If we did feel frustrated about it, we wouldn’t be living this way. That’s probably why I’ve always been drawn to the people of the forest’s edge, who don’t care at all about not only the customs that people who live in towns follow, but the four great gods in general,” Pino said, and then she gave an adorable tilt of her head. “And after actually talking to you, I learned that you’re all amazingly pleasant folks to be around, so now I’m really starting to love your people. That’s why I’m so happy to hear that you don’t hate us.”

“Mmhmm! Let me just say, I don’t hate you guys either,” a loud voice suddenly called out from beside me, seriously catching me off guard.

“D-Dan Rutim! I thought you were chatting with the others. Were you listening to our conversation this whole time?”

“Of course I was able to hear you when I was that close by! Still, you there, girl... It seems that frail young man’s actions have been annoying Ai Fa quite terribly. I may not understand exactly why she got so mad about them, but Ai

Fa and Asuta are both my precious friends! So just don't forget that if that guy angers Ai Fa again, I'm not going to just let it slide!"

"Of course. We'll make sure he never acts so rudely ever again."

After that, Pino and company took some giba meat and chatted with Dan Rutim and a few of the others for a while. Doga and Dilo remained silent, but Pino and Nachara really livened things up, and Shantu the beast tamer was smiling jovially. I wasn't able to spot any signs that the townsfolk were looking down on them at all, especially considering that the captivating Nachara was attracting just as much attention from the men in the crowd as Vina and Reina Ruu did.

Wanderers without any homeland of their own, huh? I find it hard to even imagine living like that.

Even in this foreign land, I had found a place I could call home, and for that, I felt incredibly blessed. But even as I was thinking about that, sure enough, the five giba worth of meat once again ran out by the time thirty minutes or so had elapsed.

After that, we hurriedly returned to the settlement to prepare for doing business at night. Sheera Ruu had taken charge of the group that had remained back at the Ruu settlement. Supposedly, they'd been working hard ever since the morning, and I made sure to put just as much effort in when I returned to the Fa house as well. This was the last round of preparations I would need to do for this huge ten-day job. I borrowed the help of the local women, and together we prepared the largest amount of food we ever had, and after that, I also did the prep work for the food we'd be cooking at Dora's house as well. I almost felt bad for Gilulu and Fafa when we loaded it all into their wagons.

"I'll take it as slow as possible, but still, keep an eye on our luggage to make sure nothing falls over," I warned the chefs hopping into the wagons, and then we departed from the settlement at the lower fourth hour.

Toor Deen, Yun Sudra, Fei Beim, and the other women who participated in our business had all gotten permission from their clan heads to attend the party in the Daleim lands. In the past half month, they had all definitely brought home no small amount of wealth for their clans. Though it wasn't all that much

compared to the earnings of the Fa and Ruu, who ran the businesses, they all had all been given wages of at least twelve red coins a day—about the same as the value of a giba's horns and tusks. In other words, in half a month, they'd each earned the equivalent of fifteen giba. Once it had been explained to the clan heads that tonight we were throwing a party to show appreciation for all the hard work everyone had done, none of them were able to refuse.

Of course, none of us were the sort who would let ourselves be distracted from work just because we knew there was a party waiting afterward. In fact, everyone seemed even more serious than usual, though they still appeared to be enjoying themselves as they got things ready.

For the final day of the revival festival, the Fa clan had prepared giba curry, carbonara, and giba manju, while the Ruu had made teriyaki stew and giba burgers. When the giba manju and giba burgers sold out, we would switch to selling poitan wraps and myamuu giba, as we had done before. Ever since the day of the sun's peak, we had been revising our setup daily, with an especially big revision for today. We had increased the number of poitan wraps and myamuu giba we had prepared from forty to sixty, and for the giba curry and carbonara, we had gone all out and prepared three hundred of each. The last time we had made curry base and dried pasta, we had prepared enough to last us for several days, but for this occasion, we had decided to use it all up.

Meanwhile, the Ruu had added another fifty on top of the four hundred servings of teriyaki stew they had already been preparing. This was what Sheera Ruu had been working so hard on in the morning. It was not an easy dish to prepare, and the baked poitan that were served with it required a similar amount of effort.

Even with all that, the Ruu clan had only added three new people on their side of things. But rather than the new additions being needed to compensate for their increased workload, it felt more like something they had done because all four sisters in the main house had wanted to participate. Normally, only Sheera and Rimee Ruu would be on duty, but Vina, Reina, and Lala Ruu had joined in as well. Dari Sauti had offered to assist with transporting everyone and everything, but there were still so many hunters coming along as guards that they weren't all able to fit in the wagons, with some having to walk to town in

advance.

And so, our business on the day of the downfall began with our preparations fully in place.

We had prepared 1410 servings in total, expected to earn us 2235 red coins, and had eighteen people working. We would keep on doing business until all of our dishes sold out. Since we were planning on taking tomorrow off, we were going to throw everything we had at our work today. Though the revival festival period technically ran through the third of the silver month, after today, apparently the townsfolk would start to take things easier and enjoy the aftermath of the festival, so we had figured it would be okay if we exhausted ourselves at this point. We could just recover the strength we would need for the day after tomorrow during our time off. We hadn't actually discussed all of this explicitly, but it was clear from looking at everyone's faces that we were all on the same page.

"Hey there. Looks like things are really going great, Asuta!" Yumi called out with a smile when she rolled up with her own stall around sunset at the lower sixth hour. "Yup. This is the kind of wild night you expect on the day of the downfall! I'll have to work hard if I'm going to keep up."

"Right. We prepared an especially large number of servings for today. Hopefully, we can sell them all before everyone starts getting sleepy."

"Oh come on, it's not like we townspeople are all a bunch of old fogies. You don't need to worry one bit about us getting sleepy on the day of the downfall. We've all gotta stay up to celebrate the revival of the sun god together!"

After work today, Yumi was planning to join us in the Daleim lands for our party, and she was bringing her "partners in crime" along with her too. Of course, Yumi was the only one who called them that. It was true that they tended to look like delinquents, but I didn't think that any of them were actually bad people.

"Still, I'm surprised your parents gave permission. Aren't you supposed to celebrate the holiday nights with family?"

That was why Dora's family had tended not to show up in the post town at night. Tara had slipped out of such gatherings to visit the Gamley Troupe's tent

with us, though.

“That’s just something a bunch of old folks say. Besides, I’m out here working on a holiday night, so they’ve got no right to complain about anything I do later! I always celebrate the day of the downfall with friends, so all we’re doing this time is changing the location to the Daleim lands.”

Things were kinda like that back in my home country too. I could remember overhearing some of my classmates making plans for ringing in the new year together.

Still, I just celebrated back at my place or Reina’s.

Reina’s family and my own alternated whose house we would celebrate each new year at. But regardless of where we were, my old man and I would always be the ones to make the New Year’s soba.

I’m pretty sure we were supposed to spend this year at Reina’s place... I thought, almost letting myself get overwhelmed with emotion. However, I hurriedly shook my head to clear the thought away.

“What was that about, Asuta?”

“It’s nothing. I was just remembering my homeland a bit,” I answered honestly.

“I see,” Ai Fa replied, seeming calm.

There was no helping that I sometimes got caught up in feelings about my old home. It was still such an important place to me, where I had spent seventeen years of my life. However, I had no way of returning there. The memories of my death and the seven months I had spent in this world since then had created their own spaces in my heart as well. If not for that, I never would have managed to adapt to this world as well as I had.

I had found a home here too. If you asked me whether this world or my past one were more important to me, there was no way I could possibly answer. If I were ever forced to choose between them, I would curse the fate that put me in that situation with everything I had.

What was it like for Misha, wandering the world after being exiled from Sym?

I pondered, and the thought made my heart shudder. I had only been able to avoid falling into despair after losing my home thanks to my encounter with Ai Fa. Through her, I had grown acquainted with the people of the forest's edge, which allowed me to believe I could still live a happy life. If I were driven from this second home, then I really would be lost.

I sighed as I ladled out the giba curry briskly as the orders came in. I still felt someone's gaze on my right cheek and turned to look, finding Ai Fa staring straight at me with a serious expression.

"I'm fine. Do I not look it, or something?" I told her.

"It's not that, it's just... No, focus your efforts on your work for now."

"Right, got it."

I wanted to talk with Ai Fa too, but I just couldn't make the time for that now. We would have to find a moment to have a discussion about it once this job was finished.

Despite having lost my precious family and my childhood friend, right now I was undoubtedly the luckiest guy in the world. There was no end to how far one could sink into the depths of despair, and I felt so fortunate that I was able to avoid that. I can't imagine many people knew that feeling better than I did.

And it's all thanks to you, Ai Fa.

I couldn't say it out loud, so I imbued my gaze with the thought instead.

That earned me a stealthy kick to the leg, but even so, I felt truly blessed.

4

Roughly three hours later, we finished our work. It took about as long as on the day of the sun's peak for us to run out of food. Even though we had added nearly three hundred meals, this was still the result we had achieved. The number of customers we were pulling in had grown just as fast as we were improving in our preparation and execution. On the day of the sun's peak, I had sold deep-fried giba meat, but today I had swapped that out for giba curry, which undoubtedly helped to increase our efficiency further.

Thanks to that, our seating was always full, with customers constantly overflowing out onto the road, but fortunately we didn't get chewed out by the guards on patrol this time. The laws of Genos forbade sitting in the road, but they didn't say anything about standing around eating. Those folks who couldn't wait around for seating to open up would order one item and eat it while standing before ordering another, which kept the guards from complaining.

The first to sell out were the dishes we had prepared the least of—the giba manju and poitan wraps—so after that, I entrusted Yamiru Lea to handle the giba curry sales while I swapped over to the carbonara, which took more effort to prepare. In the back half, we ended up working just two stalls with four people each, at which point the carbonara was selling about as fast as the rest did.

Myme sold out even earlier still, but she was remaining nearby with Mikel, who had come along as a customer. As Mikel would also be taking a day off from selling charcoal tomorrow, they would be heading to the Daleim lands with us too. While they were waiting for us to finish, they headed over to the Gamley Troupe's tent with Bartha guarding them and really got their fill of the festival atmosphere here in the post town. Unlike Yumi, Myme and Mikel would be spending the holiday as a family, and even though Mikel was looking as sour as ever, the father and daughter pair really did seem happy.

Once we had sold around two thirds of what we had at the stalls, the Ruu clan put together a group to head back to the Ruu settlement so they could meet up with Granny Jiba and the others who were coming. The group of four—Jiza, Darmu, Vina, and Lala Ruu, all members of the main house—headed up the road with Ruuruu and Jidura pulling two wagons, and bringing Mim Cha and the Lea tolos with them. The hunters in the group would also serve as Granny Jiba's guards.

After work was done, we headed back to The Kimyuus's Tail, where a different group of four was waiting for us. After Jiza Ruu and the others had delivered Granny Jiba to the Daleim lands, he had assigned these four to accompany us. Jeeda was one of them. I hadn't talked to him in some time.

"Hey there. I haven't seen you on guard duty in a while, Jeeda."

“I didn’t really have a choice, since my mother got recruited first...”

At first I didn’t get what he meant, but it seemed he was trying to abide by the custom that the new year should be welcomed with family. Though Jeeda had been thoroughly assimilated into the Ruu clan, he had always been a citizen of Selva by nature.

“Bartha’s already on her way over to the Daleim lands, but we might overtake them at some point.”

“Yeah, since they’ll be walking slowly out there in the dark. But there shouldn’t be anything to worry about. Any bandits who are out there will be busy drinking instead of trying to rob people on a day like today.”

Those who weren’t going to have a spot in the wagons had headed out on foot for the Daleim lands early rather than waiting around in the restaurant with the customers. Considering Granny Jiba’s group of ten had already arrived there too, we were going to have quite a few folks walking back tomorrow morning.

“Anyway, we’re gonna go return the stalls now, so just hold on for a bit.”

Ai Fa, Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, and I headed through the door into The Kimyuus’s Tail. For the whole duration of the revival festival, this place had been a real battlefield too. There were tons of customers crammed into the dining hall, and Telia Mas and the other workers were incredibly busy. The front desk was unmanned, so I peeked behind it into the kitchen, where I found Milano Mas slumped down in a chair by himself.

“Looks like you’ve been working hard today, Milano Mas.”

“Hmm? Yeah, you too. Guess you didn’t wrap up early this time, huh?”

“We didn’t, but we still managed to sell everything. Are you taking a short break?”

“Yeah, since they’re all just chugging down fruit wine at this point anyway. The giba meat’s long since run out.”

In order for people to enjoy themselves this much, there had to be other people like him working hard behind the scenes. I really wanted to take a

moment to just stand there and be impressed with him. He looked so worn out.

“You’re going to the Daleim lands now, right? You sure have a lot of energy.”

“Right, and I wanted to invite your family along too, if it wouldn’t interfere with your work.”

“As if we’d have that sort of time to spare on a holiday... But sometime during the silver month, those folks from the Daleim lands will be heading to the settlement at the forest’s edge again, yeah?” Milano Mas bluntly asked, removing his hat and wiping the sweat from his brow. “If you could bring Telia along with you again, that’d be plenty. Once you decide on a date, let me know as soon as possible.”

“Got it. Um... Thank you so much for everything you’ve done this year, Milano Mas,” I said with a bow, only for him to give me a questioning scowl.

“Why are you telling me that now?”

“Back in my home country, you’re supposed to say things like that at the end of the year. It seems that’s not really the custom here in Genos, though.”

“Yeah, everyone’s so busy making a huge commotion that they don’t have time for anything like giving thanks. Still, it really has turned out to be one heck of a year thanks to all of you,” Milano Mas said, bowing back. “I’d say we owe you all a whole lot more. So, well...I’m grateful.”

“And I’m deeply indebted to you, Milano Mas. I hope that we can keep on working together next year.”

After that, we pulled our stalls around to the back of the inn, then finally set out for the Daleim lands. We had five wagons, including the one from the Sauti clan, and two additional totos, to transport thirty-four people in total. That was already quite a few, but including the folks who had gone ahead of us, we actually had fifty in total. We were going to have seven from the small clans, two from the Sauti, two under the Zaza, including Toor Deen, and Bartha and Jeeda... The nearly forty other people who were coming all had ties to the Ruu clan. Half of them were men coming along as guards, while ten or so were chefs who were part of our business in the post town, and the rest were women who wished to join the party, Granny Jiba foremost among them.

Because of all those additional women, a single wagon wouldn't have sufficed for getting Granny Jiba there and back. With such a large number interested in coming, and since they had to have an equal number of men to accompany them, they had ended up needing two wagons and totems.

There are a hundred people under the Ruu, and nearly forty of them are heading to the Daleim lands. That really is incredible, I thought to myself while swaying along in Gilulu's wagon. We had decided that Ai Fa would be the one holding the reins when we needed to ride in the wagon at night. Even when there were torches around, I lacked the skill to run the wagon at full speed when it was this dark out.

Beside me, Toor Deen and Yun Sudra were both drifting off. Two or three hours had passed since sunset by this point, so they would ordinarily be going to bed around this time. In terms of my old world, it would be around nine in the evening, but that was still late at night for the people of the forest's edge, and after seven months of living alongside them, it felt the same way to me too.

Still, my head remained clear, and the majority of the rest of the group seemed pretty lively. The hunters in particular seemed to be brimming with excess energy and vitality, as they had been taking time off from hunting giba. Remembering how they had stayed up late talking at the last clan head meeting, I figured they could easily manage a night without any sleep if necessary.

While I was thinking about that, our wagon arrived in the Daleim lands. Darkness had fallen over the fields, but beyond them I could see light coming from some fires that were dotted around here and there. Everyone in the area must have been staying up through the night in order to celebrate the sun god's revival. There were also fires burning bright in front of Dora's house, and a large crowd was gathered around making merry.

"Oh, you made it. We only just got here ourselves," the large figure closest to the bonfire cheerfully called out. It was Bartha in bodyguard mode, clad in leather chest armor and bracers. Myme and Mikel were also there beside her.

"Good work today, Asuta! Is Yumi still working?" Myme asked.

"Yeah, but she said she'll come running over as soon as she runs out of food."

There were roughly thirty people outside cheerfully chatting away, including Myme. About half of them were people I didn't know from the Daleim lands. I had heard that the short-term hires had headed out to the post town, so these must have been relatives who also looked after the fields, or folks who lived nearby. Looking around, I noticed lights coming from a couple torches steadily approaching along the paths between the fields.

"The head of the house and Jiba Ruu are inside with the others," Bartha said, and so we went to greet Dora. However, the house was apparently nearing capacity, so we had to carefully pick and choose who would be going in. Inside, I found that seventy percent or so of the folks making merry there were people of the forest's edge.

"Hey there, Asuta! You looked like you were working hard today! You're pretty early, aren't you?"

"Yeah. We somehow managed to finish up on time."

Out of Dora's family, I spied him, his uncle, and three women. However, his sons and Tara were nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, everyone else is over at the storehouse. Dan Rutim and some of the others were saying they wanted to see the mountains of vegetables."

Now that Dora mentioned it, I didn't see all that many familiar faces from the forest's edge. I spotted Granny Jiba, Jiza Ruu, and Darmu Ruu, but the rest were all men and women whose names I didn't know.

Dora's uncle and mother were seated near Granny Jiba, and they seemed to be talking about something. Granny Jiba was wearing a smile on her wrinkly face.

"You must be tired too, Jiba Ruu. How are you holding up?"

"Oh, I'm full of pep... I got plenty of sleep earlier in the day..."

As she didn't have many teeth left, Granny Jiba's speech was a little imperfect, as always. But I could tell even in this dim lighting that her skin seemed to have a good color to it, and at any rate, she appeared to be really enjoying herself.

It was around then that the door we had come in through swung open from the outside.

“Hey, so you finally finished your work, eh, Asuta?! Jiba Ruu, that was such an amazing sight! There’s nothing dangerous about it, so you should go see for yourself!” Dan Rutim remarked, having returned from the vegetable storehouse.

“Is that so...?” Granny Jiba nodded back to him, then looked at her great-grandchild. Jiza Ruu stood with a small sigh, then reached down toward the elder’s back and legs. He lifted her small body up in his burly arms, right along with the giba pelt that had been spread over the chair she’d been sitting on.

“Well then, why don’t I go with you? And the rest of you should make yourselves at home, Asuta,” Dora offered.

“Ah, no, we have to get the food ready now while we have the chance.”

“Huh? But you only just got off work, so why not rest a bit while you can?”

“There’s no telling when exhaustion may start to set in, so I want to handle it while I still have energy to spare.”

With that, Dora, Jiza Ruu, and Granny Jiba exited the house, while we headed to the kitchen.

Today, we were only preparing a single dish: cold soba. I simply couldn’t resist the desire to serve it tonight, since it was basically New Year’s Eve.

“Sorry. I know you all had this dish in the castle town three days ago,” I apologized.

Reina Ruu had come along to assist me, and she replied with a smile, “No need to apologize. Making the same dish again in a short period of time is good practice, so I’m grateful for the opportunity. I can tell how much better we’ve gotten at making the dishes we serve at the stalls.”

“Yeah. It’s only natural you’d improve, making hundreds of servings of a dish each day.”

The group that had accompanied me to the kitchen consisted of Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, Toor Deen, and Yun Sudra. As they had all helped to prepare this

same dish in the castle town, they were the ideal chefs to have on hand for this task.

We picked up our knives to slice up a bunch of dough that had been allowed to rise, cutting it into thin strips, and did the same for the vegetables that we were going to use to make the tempura. My Sym-made vegetable knife had a thin blade similar in shape to a straight sickle, making it well suited to cutting soba.

“It sure is quite a sight, isn’t it? Seeing people of the forest’s edge and folks from the Daleim lands all jumbled together,” I said.

“That’s for sure. Jiza looks like he’s refusing to let his guard down for a single moment,” Reina Ruu replied with a giggle. “Still, this party here in the Daleim lands is exactly what Granny Jiba was wishing for. Honestly, my mother really wanted to come along too.”

“Hmm? Can she not leave the house, as the one in charge of the women?”

“That’s part of it, but I’m sure she must be thinking about my dad’s feelings too. Since he made Jiza the acting clan head, he now needs to stay at the house.”

The only ones who had stayed behind at the Ruu house were Donda and Mia Lea Ruu, Granny Tito Min, Sati Lea Ruu, and Kota Ruu. It made me feel a little lonely to even imagine the usually lively place with so few people.

“Then, during the next break period, maybe we should prioritize the folks who didn’t make it to the Daleim lands this time around. It wouldn’t be the revival festival or a party, but at least it would be a chance to deepen our relationship.”

“That’s true. If my father decides it’s necessary for him as one of the leading clan heads, he might just agree to come as well,” Reina Ruu replied.

A moment later, a voice outside the window loudly shouted, “Never mind!” Reina Ruu and I looked at one another, and then we both hurried over to see what was going on.

It was dark outside the window, as this was the opposite side of the house from the bonfire. Rather than the girl I had expected to see, though, we found Shin Ruu standing out there all by himself.

“What happened, Shin Ruu? That was Lala Ruu’s voice just now, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, Asuta and Reina Ruu... Well, you see, I went and made Lala Ruu angry again.”

“How did you do that?”

“I’m not certain. But I’m sure it was because I’m so tactless.”

As he stood there under the moonlight, Shin Ruu seemed oddly dejected. It was almost painful to look at, to the point that it was hard to imagine this was the same youth who had appeared so gallant just three days prior.

“She just asked me what I would do if I was invited to the castle town again, and I replied that I would leave the decision up to the leading clan heads... I don’t think there was anything wrong with my answer, so why did Lala Ruu get so angry?”

“Hmm.” I hummed with a tilt of my head, only for Reina Ruu to tug on the sleeve of my T-shirt.

“Asuta, as Lala’s big sister, I don’t think it would be a good idea for me to get involved. Sorry, but could I leave the rest up to you?”

“Yeah, though I don’t know if I’ll be any help or not.”

With that, Reina Ruu returned to cooking, while Ai Fa approached from her post near the kitchen door. After giving her a nod, I called out to Shin Ruu through the window, “Well, I guess I’d have to say that you answered properly as a person of the forest’s edge, but don’t you think what she really wanted to hear was your personal feelings on the matter?”

“My personal feelings?”

“Yeah. Like, saying that you would be reluctant to go there, but would have to oblige if the leading clan heads ordered you to. That would be an acceptable response for a man of the forest’s edge and might also have prevented Lala Ruu from getting angry.”

“I don’t have any particular issue with heading to the castle town, though. It wasn’t especially enjoyable, but I felt proud to have my strength as a hunter acknowledged.”

That response gave me a bit of a hint.

“But this time, a major part of what caused all that to happen was those noblewomen requesting you, right? Don’t you think that’s what Lala Ruu was worried about?”

“Why would Lala Ruu be concerned about something like that?” Shin Ruu questioned, sounding confused. And so, I had no choice but to touch on a rather delicate topic.

“Because Lala Ruu would be pretty upset if other women started making eyes at you, of course. Or at least, that’s how I see it.”

Instantly, Shin Ruu’s face went so red I could make it out clearly even under the moonlight.

“But regardless of what those noblewomen might have been imagining, any talk of marriage would be out of the question, so I cannot see the need to feel unnerved,” he said.

This was a return to what I had discussed with Lala Ruu and Ai Fa in the past. You could say that the flow of the conversation here was allowing me to make use of the ideas I had hit upon then.

“So, what if your positions were reversed? Would you be able to send Lala Ruu off to the castle town without any worries?”

“Of course. As long as there were hunters to guard her, she wouldn’t be in any danger regardless of what those nobles might think of her.”

“I see. But if someone you didn’t even know were to start leering at Lala Ruu, would you really not have any issue with that?”

“I wouldn’t,” he responded in a rather manly way. Shin Ruu was definitely more mature than I was. However, right now that was what was stopping him from being able to intuit the source of Lala Ruu’s worries and anger.

“Even so, Lala Ruu probably didn’t like those noblewomen looking at you,” Ai Fa flatly interjected while I was searching for what to say. “Even if you do not feel that way, Lala Ruu does. If you understand that, then don’t you think you should retract your words, Shin Ruu?”

“Hmm?”

“At the very least, your words have shaken Lala Ruu’s heart. If you wish to form a proper bond with her, that is something you cannot ignore,” Ai Fa stated, her tone calm yet also forceful. Her gaze was fixed firmly on Shin Ruu as she continued, “You should be talking to Lala Ruu, not Asuta. I believe your greatest mistake is simply standing there after Lala Ruu walked off in anger. If you do not know what made her mad, then should you not talk to her until you understand?”

“Yes... You’re absolutely right,” Shin Ruu replied with a nod, turning away. “My apologies for interfering with your work. I’m going to go look for Lala Ruu.”

“Right. Give it your all, Shin Ruu,” I said.

With his cloak fluttering behind him as he went, the young hunter took off running into the darkness. After watching him go, I turned toward Ai Fa. “That was very well done. All I did was waste time.”

“Not at all. Men of the forest’s edge just don’t necessarily see things the same way you do,” Ai Fa replied with a shrug, and then she returned to the entrance.

I headed back over to my station, where Sheera Ruu greeted me with a smile as she worked.

“Sorry you had to trouble yourself with that, Asuta...but I’m sure that Shin and Lala Ruu will be just fine.”

“Yeah. It’s obvious how much they care about one another, so I’m honestly not all that worried.”

After that, we immersed ourselves fully in our work.

More than just work, though, this was a group task so that we could enjoy the party together. Selling food to customers and eating a delicious meal with one another each had their own unique feel. Currently, even Toor Deen and Yun Sudra, who had looked so sleepy back in the wagon, were enjoying themselves as they sliced up vegetables with great enthusiasm.

After the dough and vegetables were all cut up, we moved over to the stoves to complete the final steps. In order to give everyone a chance to polish their

skills, I took on an advisory role and had them split into pairs who would switch back and forth with each other between boiling the noodles and frying the tempura.

We piled up the finished food on several large plates and then brought them out to the main hall. Since there were fifty people in attendance just counting those from the forest's edge, the plan was to make enough for a hundred. That way, no matter how many neighbors gathered, it would surely be enough for everyone to get a bite. But if it somehow wasn't enough, then there would still be the food prepared by the wives of the household.

We were working up a sweat as we kept on cooking away, and by the time the last thirty servings had been delivered, the party seemed to be in full swing out in the main hall. Since the food would have been difficult to carry and eat outside, apparently they had solved the crowding problem in the main hall by having everyone take turns heading in to eat and drink for a while. By the time we made it back there, the younger crowd of Rimee Ruu, Tara, and Ludo Ruu were just starting to dig in, along with Myme and Mikel.

"This is really delicious! I still can't compete with you at all when it comes to fried dishes, Asuta!" Myme enthusiastically exclaimed. Meanwhile, Mikel was wearing an even more sour expression than usual, which was no surprise, as he wasn't fond of crowds. It really felt like this was going to be a rare occurrence, having him show up at a party like this even so.

Still, things certainly were chaotic. There were a ton of unfamiliar faces from both the Daleim lands and the forest's edge all jumbled together. The sight of Dan Rutim and Dora acting friendly and chatting with anyone and everyone had become an everyday occurrence of late, but even though the unfamiliar people from both Daleim and the forest's edge were being just a bit reserved, they were still talking, eating the same food, and drinking together. So though it was indeed chaotic, I couldn't help but find it all to be really wonderful.

"Well then, let's dig in too."

Those who had been working with me, like Reina Ruu, and the ones who had been watching over us, like Ai Fa, all started slurping down our freshly prepared soba. At this point, I really had no way of knowing what time it was, so we just

had to keep on enjoying the party until the sky grew bright once more.

In the meantime, Yumi and Luia had arrived at Dora's house with five friends in tow, two guys and three girls. I didn't know their names, but I recognized all of their faces. The guys had been there with Yumi back when she had first visited my stall, while she had brought the girls along the next time.

"You made it just in time. This is the last of the food we prepared."

"Whoa, talk about a close one! Thanks to you all dawdling so much, we almost missed out on the meal!"

"Aw, shut it," one of her friends grumbled before raising a hand and greeting me with a "Hey." Though he had griped at me a whole lot back at our first meeting, that incident was now in the distant past. I remembered how startled he had been when Mida had suddenly appeared...but Vina Ruu would have been the only one who might have recognized him if I mentioned that, as no one else had been there with me. The other one was the guy who had told me later about all the trouble Mida had caused around the post town.

After we'd all had our fill of New Year's soba, we exited the house together. There were bonfires blazing bright here and there, and people were gathered around them enjoying themselves. There was a cloth spread out on the ground for Granny Jiba, and she was currently resting on top of it. Vina Ruu was there beside her too, while Jiza and Darmu Ruu were standing by not far off.

Nobody seemed to have brought any instruments, but I could hear folks singing and clapping to the beat, and I saw girls dancing and twirling around as well. A short while later, the kimyuus meat and vegetable soup prepared by the wives was brought outside, and a great cheer arose. For tonight, at least, it seemed like everyone's stomachs were truly bottomless.

Time steadily passed on by, and the women from the forest's edge began to dance as well. They had supposedly refused at first because dances were strongly associated with courtship for young women, but they got up too when Granny Jiba said, "There's no such custom here in this land, so you needn't worry about that sort of thing if you want to dance..."

It wasn't the sort of passionate dancing I had seen at the forest's edge, but they all looked quite elegant. Perhaps they were trying to imitate how the

women from the Daleim lands were dancing. If so, then there was some serious ad-libbing on display. The way that they danced around the bonfires with their translucent veils and shawls trailing behind them was absolutely beautiful and a wonder to behold.

After we had enjoyed watching their dancing for a bit, Ai Fa and I stepped away for a moment and quickly encountered a group taking a break off to the side of the house: Yamiru Lea, Rau Lea, and Tsuvai. The three of them were stretched out on top of a cloth, with the latter two fast asleep.



“Oh yeah, you weren’t dancing with the others, were you, Yamiru Lea?” I called out, earning a glare from her.

“I’m no good at dancing. In fact, I’m more unskilled than most at moving in general.”

“But you are pushing yourself to stay up, right? Those two seem to be out cold.”

“Hmph. Tsuvai is one thing, but I wonder if our clan head even realizes he’s supposed to be on guard duty. He was gulping down a substantial amount of fruit wine earlier, and before long he ended up like this.”

Despite the sour expression on her face, Yamiru Lea looked quite happy, nestled there between her past and present family.

“I would have liked to invite Mida too if it were possible. Even if that would have made the food preparations even tougher,” I said.

“Mida’s actions made him especially infamous, even compared to the other members of the Suun clan, so that simply wouldn’t do. Donda Ruu has also said it’s too soon for him to head back into town.”

Mida had smashed a number of stalls that had displeased him around the post town. If the time when he could freely head into town again ever came, that would definitely be a sign that the rift between us and Genos had lessened.

“Well, even Ji Maam has found some acceptance, so there may no longer be any need to worry about his appearance frightening anyone.”

Ji Maam was currently drinking alongside Dan Rutim. It seemed around half of the more than twenty men who had come here were drinking fruit wine.

“It’s quite an incredible sight, isn’t it? Perhaps the people of the forest’s edge have finally freed themselves from Zattsu Suun’s curse,” Yamiru Lea whispered. “There’s still no shortage of people of the forest’s edge who do not trust the citizens of Genos, such as the Zaza and Beim. But at least there don’t seem to be any left who are filled with anger or hatred.”

“Yeah. This is just a fraction of the people of the forest’s edge, but I hope that’s true for all of us.”

Separate from Dan Rutim's gathering, Dora and Dari Sauti were chatting about something. Sufira Zaza and Fei Beim were hanging around with Ama Min Rutim and several others. Rimee Ruu and Tara were having fun with a bunch of other children, while Toor Deen and Reina Ruu were talking with some women from the Daleim lands.

I heard a voice say, "Hmm," and when I turned to look I found Ai Fa staring off into the distance. Following her gaze, I saw a young boy and girl huddling together at the edge of the plaza, their shoulders touching. Shin and Lala Ruu. At this distance, I couldn't possibly make out their expressions, but things didn't seem uneasy between them at all.

After that, we continued to talk to all sorts of people. Dora had boasted that they would have no issues providing bedding, but virtually no one seemed to be taking him up on the offer. Those who did fall asleep were either tossed into the house or woken up on the spot. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the party as much as they possibly could. I nodded off a little myself partway through, but after that I got my energy back just fine.

Time gradually moved along, and eventually the starry sky shifted to a bluish gray, at which point those few who had gone to bed were dragged back outside. Ai Fa and I went to go check on Granny Jiba and make sure she wasn't pushing herself too hard, and then we headed outside too.

Around then, the bonfires were put out, and everyone started staring off to the east, toward the dark-green outline of Mount Morga. Soon a border of white light formed along the crest of the mountain, and the grand sight of the reborn sun god began to emerge. When the sunlight finally reached the ground, the folks from the Daleim lands all cheered in unison.

The people of the forest's edge, meanwhile, stood there silently. It was as if they didn't want to interfere with the joy felt by the folks from the Daleim lands. We just stared at the shining visage of the sun god, trying to take in at least a little of the happiness they felt.

The women from the forest's edge, who all got up early, were able to see the sun rise every day, and of course, the same was true for the folks from the Daleim lands, but today it still felt special somehow... It was a sacred moment.

This also meant the westerners were all a year older now, with Tara turning nine, Jeeda fifteen, and Bartha thirty-five. As of today, the old year had ended and a new one had begun. My head was a bit fuzzy from lack of sleep, but the moment still felt solemn to me too.

I had only been here for seven months out of the past year.

So then, what was the next year going to be like?

I didn't even know how I had been reborn here in this world, and as a result, I had no way of knowing when I might vanish... But with Ai Fa by my side, I had a powerful feeling that I needed to live my life to the fullest while burying those unnerving thoughts deep inside.

"I've lived for eighty-five years, but I cannot think of many that were as special as this one..." Granny Jiba said, standing with the help of Rimee and Jiza Ruu on Ai Fa's other side. "Of course, I'm sure it was a special year for nearly all of our people, not just one who has lived as long as I have..."

"That's true. But this year may turn out to be even more special still," I replied as I stared at the sight of the sun god slowly emerging. "Jiba Ruu, I hope you'll be able to keep watching everything we're going to accomplish. This year, and the next, and the one after that too."

"I would certainly love to do so...and I am truly glad that I feel that way now..."

I felt so much joy I could hardly stand it.

This year and the next one and the one after that, I wished to keep on doing my best at everything I did. The fact that I could think that way meant that I was living a truly happy life.

With that, the sun god had revived, and our new year had begun.

Intermezzo: The Young Girl and the Hunter

“Hm. Seems the party is in full swing around here,” Jiza Ruu heard someone say as his people’s stalls were handing out whole-roast giba in the post town.

Even without needing to look, he knew who had said it. When he turned around, he found just the person he had expected standing there: that girl Pino, the Gamley Troupe’s acrobat.

“It *is* the final day of the oh-so-merry revival festival, after all. It would be a shame for people to not have any fun. Are you enjoying yourself too, Jiza Ruu?”

“It’s not as if I came here to entertain myself... I am keeping a watchful eye out in order to protect my brethren from the forest’s edge.”

“Indeed. How *admirable* of you,” Pino remarked, her red lips twisting into a captivating smile.

She truly was a mysterious girl. The Gamley Troupe was full of strange people, but she was on a whole other level, even compared to them. Jiza Ruu had never laid eyes on someone so inexplicable.

“So, do you have some sort of business with me? You were just talking with Dan Rutim, weren’t you?”

“Dan Rutim is that especially large hunter, right? Yes, he’s quite the pleasant fellow. I always find myself enjoying his big, honest smile.”

“Then you should enjoy it to the fullest. It would be a shame not to have fun. Isn’t that what you said?”

“Heh heh. People shouldn’t obsess over maximizing what they get out of every single moment,” Pino replied with a laugh as she looked around. Jiza Ruu followed her gaze.

There was a continuous flow of townsfolk crowding around the stalls run by Asuta and the others as their hunter guards watched over them. Dan Rutim and Giran Ririn, meanwhile, had carried a fruit wine barrel over to the space beside

the stalls, where they were excitedly partaking of it, along with several townsfolk.

Just as Pino had said before, today was the final day of the sun god's revival festival. From what Jiza Ruu had been told, it technically continued into the beginning of the silver month, but that was more a time for rest than making merry.

People were eating giba and kimyuus meat, and drinking fruit wine while the sun was still high in the sky. And it wasn't just the townsfolk. Jiza Ruu's brethren from the forest's edge were joining in too. It was a strange sight to see.

Jiza Ruu valued norms above all else. They were important to follow in order for people to live healthy lives. For the people of the forest's edge, keeping to their laws and customs was an absolute imperative.

As they were currently on a break period, it wasn't against the laws of the forest's edge for those under the Ruu to be drinking wine in the middle of the day. Dan Rutim and Giran Ririan might have been on guard duty, but there was no problem with them having a few drinks. In fact, those two could have drunk a whole barrel of fruit wine and still have been able to fight perfectly well.

But as to whether all of this went against the customs of the forest's edge? That wasn't so clear. For the past eighty years, Jiza Ruu's people had lived without forming any ties with the outside world. Even if this broke no laws, it was hard to call it fitting behavior for the people of the forest's edge.

On the other hand, it had been officially decreed that the people of the forest's edge should learn more about the outside world. The leading clan heads had stated that it was important to study outside laws and customs, and form healthy relationships with the townsfolk, so as to not repeat the mistakes of the Suun clan.

And so, Jiza Ruu tried to watch over this crowd with a terribly impartial disposition. It was his duty as an heir to the seat of leading clan head to determine whether or not such activities were proper for people of the forest's edge.

"You look like you're thinking pretty hard there." Pino said with a giggle, coming in close to his ear. When he glanced in her direction, he found her eyes

narrowed as she smiled in amusement. “Your eyebrows are all wrinkled. Is something worrying you?”

“No, not at all. I’m simply trying to carry out my duty.”

“Hmm... It seems you must have quite a plethora of worries as the next leading clan head, huh?” Pino stated, as if she had been peering into Jiza Ruu’s inner thoughts. However, he surprisingly didn’t find her piercing insight to be irritating. Instead, it felt helpful, as if she had sped up the conversation. It made him feel as if he were talking to Gazraan Rutim, who was more intelligent than anyone else at the forest’s edge. Of course, Pino and Gazraan Rutim weren’t really alike at all. However, their level of intelligence at least felt similar. It seemed that was something Jiza Ruu liked in his conversation partners.

“I apologized to the Fa clan a little while ago, by the way... But thanks to you, it seems everything’s worked out just fine.”

“You apologized...? You mean for that strange song the minstrel played for Asuta?”

“Yes, that was the reason. I’ve been really worried that they’d end up hating all of us thanks to that blockhead.”

“Hmm... I can’t see how that has anything to do with me, since I don’t recall ever discussing the incident with them.”

“Even so, it’s still thanks to you. As the next clan head, seems you’ve earned some real trust from your allies.”

“Trust...” Jiza Ruu repeated. “I suspect there are not many good words that could be said about the relationship between Asuta’s group and myself. Of course, that doesn’t change the fact that the Fa clan are our brethren from the forest’s edge, so...”

“Clinging to each other and getting all buddy-buddy isn’t the only way to show trust. You can still trust someone even if you’ve never shared so much as a single word.”

In the past, Jiza Ruu had had plenty of criticism for Asuta. He had questioned the members of the Fa clan about whether someone born in the outside world had any right to interfere with the affairs of the forest’s edge, and whether the

Ruu and Fa should forge a bond in the first place. He couldn't recall any point after that when he had opened his heart to them either. The Ruu and Fa's bond had grown deeper and deeper, and Jiza Ruu had simply remained an observer.

Trust... Trust, she says?

All Jiza Ruu had done was keep a watchful eye over their actions. It had been decided that at next year's clan head meeting, the question of whether these activities were a medicine or a poison for their people would be officially answered. He had been watching them closely so that he could form a just and fair opinion on the matter.

"They really seem to be enjoying themselves, huh?" Pino said, her voice creeping into his ear.

Jiza Ruu had been staring straight at Asuta's back, but now he spared a glance for the next stalls over, where his younger sisters were similarly working hard.

Rimee and Lala Ruu were happily smiling away, while Reina Ruu was slicing off giba meat with a serious expression. Vina Ruu was doing her best too, even though she wasn't particularly skilled at cooking, with the young Deen girl providing guidance.

This was something else Jiza Ruu needed to pay attention to. The expressions on his younger sisters' faces and the way they were comporting themselves at work were all good evidence of the kind of impact Asuta was having on the forest's edge.

"Well, I guess I gotta go play a flute or something," Pino remarked, and Jiza Ruu turned her way. She was giving him a big grin as she stared up at him.

"So, why exactly did you approach me, then?"

"No reason in particular. I simply wanted to talk to you, so I carved out a little time for it."

"I can't imagine what you expected to gain from doing so."

"Well, like I told you before, there's more to life than always thinking about gaining something. And our creed says we should always act however we please," Pino remarked with a giggle as the sleeves of her brilliantly colored

attire fluttered about. “But I suppose you don’t have much to talk about with the likes of me, right? I’m sorry for interrupting you while you’re doing something so important.”

“Not at all... Actually, now that I think about it, there *is* something I wish to ask you.”

“Oh my. I’m glad to hear it. What do you want to know?”

“How old are you, exactly?”

Pino opened her eyes wide in surprise, and then she gave a cheerful laugh. “Ah ha ha, it’s rather uncouth to just ask someone that. I’ll have to watch myself around you... At any rate, thanks for your time.”

Pino vanished into the crowd, looking like she was dancing as she went. As he watched her small figure depart, Jiza Ruu found himself starting to smile a little.

Group Performance: Mishil the Vegetable Seller

The strange-looking young man first visited Mishil's shop on the twenty-third of the green month.

"Excuse me, I'd like to purchase some gigo and chatchi. Would that be possible?"

He looked even younger than Mishil's grandson. Despite having skin like that of a westerner, he had black hair and eyes like an easterner. He wore a friendly smile on his face, like someone who made a living through sales, but he was accompanied by a boy and a woman from the forest's edge, who were standing behind him. His lanky frame was clad in the attire decorated with swirling patterns that was typically worn by their kind.

"What, do I look like I have all these vegetables lined up here on a whim?" Mishil shot back, furrowing her brow as firmly as she could.

The black-haired youth looked perplexed.

Mishil continued, "I have vegetables lined up here in the area set aside for stalls. Of course they're for sale. If you want to buy some, then show me some coins. Don't waste my time with long-winded greetings."

Mishil loathed the people of the forest's edge. They were heretics who threatened the peace in town. She had spoken to them harshly with the intention of driving them off...but for some reason, the confused look on the boy's face had disappeared, and he was once again smiling pleasantly.

"If you say so. I do have money, and I'd like to buy some vegetables, please. Um, I'd like as much gigo as I can get for one red coin."

"Ah, we'll take two red coins' worth of gigo and three of chatchi!" the boy from the forest's edge loudly interjected from behind his companion. He was shorter than the black-haired young man and had a youthful face, but he had a sword and a hatchet dangling from his hip and was clad in a giba pelt cloak.

Mishil sighed heavily, then cut a gigo longer than she was tall in half and held

it out toward the black-haired kid first.

“One red coin will only get you this much.”

“Thank you.”

Mishil then placed another gigo and six chatchi on a cloth. “This covers your order, so pay up.”

“Huh? Three red coins only gets you six chatchi? You could buy twice as many poitan for that price,” the young hunter with the yellowish hair complained, but before Mishil could start shouting back, the overly voluptuous girl from the forest’s edge next to him interjected in a sleepy voice.

“Yes, chatchi are expensive... My apologies, but could we change our order to just one coin’s worth of gigo and get a couple more chatchi instead?”

Mishil silently took back the gigo she had just cut and added two more chatchi.

“I had no idea chatchi were so expensive! I’ve never looked into the cost of vegetables before now, so I had no clue,” the young hunter remarked while holding out his coins, not looking the least bit unsure of himself. It seemed they had already bought vegetables from another seller, as he then tossed his eight chatchi into a bag that already had some other produce in it.

Then the black-haired young man chimed in again beside him, “Um, I’d like to ask you a question... How many days do gigo last?”

“I cut that one, so it’ll start going bad after two or three days. A whole gigo will last for around ten days or so, and if you bury it in the ground, it’ll stay good for around a month.”

“Oh, you can preserve them by burying them? They must be similar to burdock, just like they look,” the kid muttered cryptically with a pensive look.

However, then Mishil added, “But since you live in the forest’s edge, the giba and giiz are going to dig them up no matter where you try to bury them. Still, I suppose if your goal is just to make the giba fatter, go ahead and bury as many as you please.”

“Is that so? Thank you for being so generous with your advice,” the kid said

with a smile, as if none of her sarcasm had made it through at all. “Oh, and would it be possible to buy gigo from you regularly?”

“Regularly? What are you planning on using all that gigo for?”

“For cooking, of course. By mixing gigo and poitan together, you can make some really delicious stuff with them.”

That was a person of the forest’s edge for you, mixing gigo with poitan of all things. She had poured her heart and soul into growing these gigo, so Mishil felt pretty dejected about them being eaten in such a miserable way.

“I’m actually planning to open a stall here in the post town to sell my cooking soon, so I’ll need gigo each time I want to make poitan bread for that... Would it be possible for me to come by at the end of each day to let you know how many I’ll need the day after and ask you to set them aside?”

“Ordering a day in advance shouldn’t be any issue at all. But if you need that many gigo, shouldn’t you buy from a bigger seller instead?”

“Well, I’ve heard that the gigo you sell are especially plump and sweet, so...”

“Who’s been going around running their mouth like that?!”

“Dora, who sells vegetables a little north of here.”

“That brat Dora, eh? He should know when to keep his mouth shut.”

“You call Dora a brat?” the black-haired young man asked with an amused smile. To someone who had lived to the age of seventy like Mishil, pretty much everyone seemed like children.

At any rate, after that, the troublesome trio headed back to the settlement at the forest’s edge for the day. However, for Mishil, this was just the beginning of a terribly obnoxious, long-lasting association with the people of the forest’s edge.



“Um, sorry, excuse me, but would it be possible to triple the amount of gigo I purchase from you starting tomorrow?” the black-haired kid—who was apparently named Asuta of the Fa clan—asked Mishil six days after their first meeting.

“Triple? Did you just say you want to *triple* the amount of gigo you buy?”

“Yes. I’m really sorry for the sudden request. My cooking has been selling better than expected, and it looks like I’m probably going to need that much gigo from now on.”

Of all things, this Asuta kid had started selling food made with giba meat in the post town. It had only been three days since he’d opened his stall, and he was already coming to her saying things like this.

“Hold on a moment. You said you prepared just ten servings on the first day and that you only decided to increase that number to forty today. Are you honestly telling me you’re going to triple that already?”

“Yes. Depending on how sales go tomorrow, the day after that, I may add a second stall and prepare sixty servings for each of them.”

It was utterly unbelievable. A stall here in the post town was doing great if it could manage to sell fifty servings. There were lots of passersby, but they had no shortage of options when it came to stalls and inns serving food. In spite of that, he claimed he would be able to sell 120 servings of something as repulsive as giba cooking... It beggared belief.

“If I do manage to sell out each day, I’m going to keep needing to buy this amount of gigo... That won’t be too much, will it?” the kid asked, looking worried.

Feeling irritated, Mishil shot back, “I said I’d sell you whatever you ordered, didn’t I? Don’t go thinking so little of me.”

“A-All right. Sorry.”

“Still, didn’t you get taken away by the guards earlier today? Are you still going to keep on doing business even so?”

“Oh, you saw that? That was pretty embarrassing... Well, what happened was we had a bunch of customers show up all at once from both the south and the east, and I didn’t have enough food for all of them, so they kind of started quarreling. That’s why we need to be sure to prepare enough tomorrow,” Asuta replied, finally getting a serious look in his eyes. Those were the eyes of a full-fledged merchant.

Mishil stared back into them for a moment, and then snorted. “I just prepare the vegetables as they’re ordered. But if you break our business agreement, I won’t sell you so much as a single chatchi after that.”

“Got it. Thank you,” he replied with a childish smile. He really knew how to get on Mishil’s nerves.

Two days later, that irritation grew even stronger. Once again, Asuta was visiting her place looking all apologetic.

“Um, I’m so sorry, but...would it be possible to buy more gigo than we agreed upon for today?”

Apparently, even 120 servings hadn’t been enough.

“If you want gigo, then stop with all the pointless blathering! Just show me your coins!” Mishil shouted as she took out her vegetable knife to start cutting gigo.

“Huh? You want to take even more gigo to the post town?” her son asked when she returned home, sounding astonished. Giving her worn-out hips a pat, Mishil furrowed her brow and stared at him.

“What, are you going to complain about it? The number of orders has gone up. I don’t see why that would be a problem.”

“But ma, we’ve also got a lot of customers who buy our gigo in the castle town. If you take too many of them to the post town, we could eventually run short, so isn’t it best to hold back a bit?”

“Whether we sell them in the post town or the castle town, it’s not like the price changes.”

“No, but we can get tips in the castle town, and if things go well, we might find someone willing to purchase everything we grow. Then you wouldn’t need to go to the post town anymore.”

“What, you’re trying to steal work from this old bag of bones now?” Mishil questioned with a glare, only for her son to helplessly shrug.

“I’m worried about your health. You pull a wagon to town every day without

even using a totos to help out, which is not something a seventy-year-old woman should be doing.”

“All the hard work I do every single day is the only reason I’ve been able to stay in good health at my age! But if you no longer have any use for an old fool like me, then I guess you should go ahead and do as you please.”

“You’re so stubborn...” her son grumbled while withdrawing back into the house. Mishil snorted at him, then went to stow the now empty wagon in their storehouse.

Mishil had been born to a family that ran a fairly large field here in the Daleim lands. She awoke with the rising of the sun, dug up gigo, chatchi, and nenon, and sold them. That was the life she had lived for as long as she could remember.

Her son and grandchildren had grown up healthy and strong, and now worked alongside her. And as for herself, she planned to keep on working until her legs gave out on her, and then, when her strength was gone, her soul would depart. That was all there was to it. Mishil’s husband’s soul had already gone to the western god like that ten years ago.

I’ve lived for such a long time now, and I no longer have any regrets.

Still, what was the western god thinking, throwing the people of the forest’s edge into her path so close to the end of her long life? Mishil despised the people of the forest’s edge. They were incapable of living in harmony with the townsfolk. The lord of Genos never should have granted their request eighty years ago. He ought to have sent them straight back to Jagar.

Some folks said that without the people of the forest’s edge, giba would lay waste to the fields in the Daleim lands, and the farmers who worked there never would have been able to achieve their current level of prosperity. Mishil, however, thought all of that should have been left up to fate. Starving to death or getting run through by a giba could be part of a person’s fate too, and having that fate snatched away by the people of the forest’s edge just didn’t sit right with her.

If they had just stuck to living in their settlement at the forest’s edge, she wouldn’t have had anything to complain about. They were more like barbarians

than hunters, but as long as they stayed away from ordinary folks, there was no way they would ever be able to become a problem. However, they had been forbidden from eating the fruits that grew in the forest, which meant that they had to sell giba tusks and pelts in town so they could afford to buy produce. What sort of a life was that? Both the people of the forest's edge who had accepted that condition and the lord of Genos who had forced them into it had been utter fools.

If they had been satisfied with living like that, then Mishil wouldn't have had any issue with them. But the people of the forest's edge had done so many horrendous things time and time again. In the past, they had pillaged fields, attacked travelers, and kidnapped young women on numerous occasions. Lately, however, they had just been causing a bit of commotion in the post town every now and then. In the end, though, what mattered was that they kept doing these things because they weren't happy with the way of life the lord of Genos had decreed for them.

The people of the forest's edge hated the townsfolk.

And the townsfolk hated the people of the forest's edge back.

The Genos domain never should have accepted them in the first place.

Many people of the forest's edge had fallen to giba or starved to death in place of the townsfolk, and over time, the survivors had come to hate the people they were supposed to be protecting, who hated them just as much in return... None of that sat right with Mishil at all.

Sooner or later, that kid's gonna get hurt real bad by this situation too.

If he would have just closed his stalls and stayed in the settlement at the forest's edge from then on, it really would have been for the best. To Mishil, that was clearly the only good path for him to take.



"Hello, Granny Mishil!" Tara called out while stopping by the old lady's street shop several days later. She was the daughter of Dora, a vegetable seller who came from the Daleim lands just like Mishil. The girl had an adorable little face, not at all like her father's, and wasn't even ten years old yet.

“Hey there.” Mishil nodded back to Tara, but then she noticed that the girl was holding something unusual in her hands. It was a wooden plate carrying what looked like a snack from a stall, split in half. “What’s that there? If you took a plate from a stall, you’re gonna get chewed out for it.”

“Oh, no, I just borrowed it from a stall that belongs to somebody I know, ’cuz I wanted you to try Asuta’s cooking too, Granny Mishil!”

The dish consisted of meat and vegetables between two pieces of what looked like white fuwano bread. The meat was coated in a red tarapa sauce, and there was finely sliced tino poking out from the sides. It was larger and looked more filling than a kimyuus manju, despite having been cut in half.

“Asuta’s that black-haired kid from the forest’s edge, right? Ain’t no way I’m gonna eat something made with giba meat.”

“Huh? But why? Asuta’s cooking is really tasty!”

“Even if it is, I’ve just got no interest in eating giba.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it, though. You won’t grow tusks or have your skin get darker or anything!”

Obviously, Mishil didn’t believe in those ridiculous superstitions at all. However, she was well aware of just how frightening giba truly were. She had set up a number of pitfalls around her field, and from time to time managed to catch one or two, if they happened to be especially foolish.

Those beasts were more like monsters than animals. They had terrifying horns and tusks, and their cries were like thunderclaps. Some grew to be as big as karon, and from what she had heard, they would even eat people if they got hungry enough.

Nobody from the south or east would have been nearly this stringent about shunning giba, but Mishil was a natural-born westerner. She had lived in Genos’s Daleim county all her life, so she couldn’t imagine anyone with their head on straight ever eating giba.

“But Asuta used your gigo to make this. My dad says he’s really happy the tarapa and tino he sells are being used to make such tasty food.”

“Hmph. That’s quite a change of heart, considering how much Dora’s always feared giba and the people of the forest’s edge.”

“Yeah! My dad’s been saying that westerners and the people of the forest’s edge should get along better!”

They would never be able to get along. The citizens of Genos and the people of the forest’s edge hated one another. No matter how desperately that Asuta kid tried, sooner or later it was all going to end up turning into a tragedy that could never be undone.

“Aren’t you interested in finding out what sort of cooking your vegetables are being used for, Granny Mishil?” Tara questioned, tilting her head. “My dad said that someone as proud of her work as you would definitely want to know...”

That Dora sure was cheeky. After glaring down at the food atop the plate for a bit, Mishil suddenly reached out and grabbed it. She could feel the warmth of the meat and the tarapa sauce through the white doughy outside. The old woman then took a bite as Tara watched.

Instantly, the abundant flavor of the tarapa spread throughout her mouth.

It was surprisingly sweet.

No, wait, that sweetness had to have come from aria, without a doubt. The tarapa sold in the post town were quite sour, so he must have mixed in some finely diced aria as well.

Then there was the meat. Folks said giba meat stank and was too tough to eat, but Mishil found the meat to be remarkably good, and quite tender.

Its taste and tenderness were just as good as the karon torso meat she’d been able to eat a handful of times in her life. Actually, it was even more tender than that, by quite a bit. It seemed to almost melt in her mouth, making her wonder if it was truly even meat she was chewing. And then there was the hot meat juice and oil that were gushing out of it.

It was incredibly delicious meat.

The taste of the tarapa was also superb.

The dish also had those pieces of bread that looked like they were made with

fuwano and some finely chopped tino to moderate those powerful flavors.

That Asuta kid had said he was mixing her gigo with poitan. That had to be the origin of this springy, fluffy bread. Only the people of the forest's edge, travelers, and soldiers on the field of battle ever ate poitan, and yet he had somehow made it into something similar to fuwano bread.

Mishil was left at a loss for words for a moment, wondering just what in the world this dish even was.

"It's delicious, isn't it? It's called a giba burger! It's my favorite!"

At some point, Tara had begun chowing down on the dish as well, and the area around her lips was all stained red from the tarapa now. Mishil met the girl's adorable smile with a sour look, then grabbed a single red coin.

"How much does this dish cost?"

"Huh? Two red coins..."

"Then half of it would be one red coin, right?"

"Huh?! I don't need any money! Giba burgers are so big that if I ate a whole one myself, I'd make my tummy hurt!"

"That's still no reason for you to give it to me for free. You bought it with the money your father gives you for helping with his job, right?"

"I don't want it! My dad'll get mad at me if I take it!"

Tara stepped back, and Mishil returned her coin to its original place.

"In that case, why don't you take some chatchi back with you in exchange? You can have your mother boil them for dinner."

"Huh? But..."

"If you refuse even that, I'll have to return the food to you from inside my stomach."

"O-Okay. You sure are stubborn, Granny Mishil."

"Hmph. I don't wanna hear that from you."

With that, Mishil forced Tara to accept a pair of chatchi. The girl stood there

with a troubled look on her face for a while, but eventually she said, “Thank you!” and disappeared into the crowd.

At that age, she hadn’t yet learned to fear the people of the forest’s edge or giba. Giba were said to be living natural disasters, and the people of the forest’s edge who ate them were a vicious tribe whose members possessed inhuman strength.

Even discounting the exaggerated way people talked about them, though, Mishil knew very well how terrifying both of them were. Mishil’s father had been killed by a starving giba that had wandered into the Daleim lands, and she had seen how frightening the people of the forest’s edge could be with her own eyes, though just once.

Even so...Mishil couldn’t help but acknowledge that this dish was delicious.

What a thoroughly obnoxious little boy...

The obnoxious little boy in question visited Mishil’s shop just a few hours later.

“I’m sorry about this, but my stall contract ends on the sixth of the blue month, so I’m planning on taking the following day off.”

“Hmph. So, that means you won’t need any gigo that day, eh?”

“That’s right... But I get the feeling that I’m going to have even more customers than usual on the days before and after that break, so I was thinking of preparing 170 meals the day before, and two hundred for the day after...”

Holding back a sigh, Mishil shouted back, “Fine! You can do whatever you want!”



Asuta continued coming to Mishil’s shop to purchase gigo almost daily, and when he eventually started selling his cooking to an inn, he added thirty chatchi to his order every other day as well.

Several serious incidents did happen along the way. Some criminals who had escaped from the forest’s edge attempted to raid a merchant caravan heading for Sym, and then they had attacked Asuta’s group working in the post town as

well, but they had been swiftly brought to justice. Even so, Asuta never stopped working, and gradually, people around town seemed to start looking more favorably upon the people of the forest's edge. The authorities had long turned a blind eye toward any crimes the people of the forest's edge had committed in the past, but this time, the castle had passed proper judgment upon them, and one of the criminals had supposedly even been dealt with by a person of the forest's edge too.

Apparently, all the crimes that had been committed against the townsfolk were the work of the members of the leading clan of the forest's edge alone, and most of their people had had no idea any of it had even been happening. Furthermore, the ones who had been most responsible for everything that had happened had been tried and convicted, and three new leading clan heads had been appointed. This was the story that everyone was spreading around, and it seemed plausible enough.

In the aftermath, it seemed that many of the younger townsfolk had been shocked to learn just how impoverished the people of the forest's edge were, to the point that some of the tribespeople were even starving to death. But Mishil had to wonder why they were so surprised.

Giba tusks and pelts didn't sell for all that much. Supposedly, they had been highly prized back when the people of the forest's edge had first moved here, but now there was an oversupply due to how many giba were being hunted each and every day. Horns and tusks could only be used to make accessories, and not many people had a need for rugs made from their pelts unless they lived in much colder, harsher lands. The most you could possibly get out of a giba was two white coins.

Of course, two white coins was nothing to scoff at. Mishil would have had to sell ten whole gigo to make that much. However, growing and selling gigo wasn't a dangerous job. The people of the forest's edge risked their very lives, working together to take down vicious giba, and that was all they got to show for it.

They were forbidden from gathering the bounty of Morga or cultivating fields, so they just kept on hunting giba after giba. There was no way anyone could acquire much more than an average amount of wealth like that. After they had

finally realized that fact, the folks from the post town were starting to reevaluate how they should treat the people of the forest's edge.

However, that wasn't all that had occurred.

Just when it had started to seem like relations between the townsfolk and the people of the forest's edge had been warming up, that Asuta kid had gotten himself kidnapped. According to the rumors, a man dressed like a noble had been behind it. The amount of upset this news had caused in the post town was hard to believe. The previous disruption from the other day hadn't even come close.

The day after Asuta had been taken, dozens of people of the forest's edge had descended upon the post town, and for a moment it had looked as if they had been about to cross swords with the guards.

"Can you, the guards of this town, swear to us that you will be able to return our comrade to us in good health by yourselves?!" a large fellow who was one of the new leading clan heads of the forest's edge had bellowed. He was a giant of a man with a frightening appearance like that of a wild beast.

The people of the forest's edge had claimed that a noble of Genos had abducted Asuta. Something to do with a quarrel between them and the lord of the house of Turan.

It really had been mayhem in the post town that day, with most feeling a jumble of fear toward the people of the forest's edge and anger at the foolish nobles.

I figured things would end up like this eventually... Mishil thought to herself as she opened her vegetable street shop in the post town just like always. *The people of the forest's edge and the townsfolk are just plain incompatible. Trying to force the matter and live alongside one another is the reason all this bedlam is happening.*

Back when Mishil had still been young, right around the time her oldest son had finally managed to find himself a bride, an incident had occurred in the post town. Some scoundrels who had come wandering into town from elsewhere had crossed the people of the forest's edge. They had tried to go after some women of the forest's edge who had come to the post town, supposedly, and

when an older woman with them had tried to stop the men, they had knocked her down and injured her terribly.

The scoundrels had been taken in by the guards on the spot, and after interrogation, they had been given tattoos branding them as criminals and had subsequently been exiled from Genos. It had been a weighty punishment, banning them from ever setting foot in this land again. However, it hadn't been enough to quell the anger felt by the people of the forest's edge. The clan head of the woman who had been injured had then come to town on his own and slaughtered the criminals as they had been leaving Genos.

"The leading clan head of the forest's edge had told us we must obey the laws of Genos! But I cannot ignore my rage at the humiliation and injury inflicted on my mother! If you say I am guilty of a crime, then judge me as you please, in accordance with the laws of Genos!" the hunter had shouted while tossing his bloody sword to the ground. After that, he had been taken into custody by the guards and sent away to the castle. Mishil had watched this happen with her own two eyes.

In the end, the man had been given the death sentence, and because he had also broken their own laws, the people of the forest's edge had offered no objection to that judgment. But ever since then, the townsfolk had started to look upon the people of the forest's edge with more and more fear, as any trouble they had caused in town after that point had always seemed to get overlooked.

He really was a beastly man... After seeing something like that, anyone would believe that the vicious strength of the giba dwells in the people of the forest's edge, who consume their meat.

A single hunter had beaten down all of the guards who had been present and cut down five criminals, one after another. It had been such a dreadful sight that she still remembered it perfectly even now, decades later.

But those nobles hiding behind their stone walls don't know anything about how frightening the people of the forest's edge can truly be. That's how we ended up in this situation.

The people of the forest's edge wouldn't forgive the nobles of Genos, and if

they injured a noble, they would never be forgiven either. Things were very likely heading toward an unavoidable breakdown between Genos and the people of the forest's edge.

Without the people of the forest's edge around, half of our fields will probably become feeding grounds for the giba. Her sons and grandchildren could end up living far more difficult lives than her. Maybe that was just their fate, but she still found the thought regrettable.

Even when the sun hit its peak and beyond, things remained noisy in the post town. The people of the forest's edge had ignored the guards and were now rushing about all over the place. They must have been searching for Asuta and the scoundrels who had snatched him. Since they weren't able to set foot in the castle town, that was pretty much all they could do.

It didn't seem like Mishil was going to get in a proper day's business. And so, with the gigo she had brought for Asuta still in her wagon, she got ready to leave. However, a voice called out to her from behind just as she was about to start pulling her wagon.

"Um, please hold on. Are you closing for business for the day?"

When she turned to look, Mishil found two young women from the forest's edge rushing over to her. One was a pretty girl with her black hair tied up on both sides, while the other girl looked strong-willed and had her red hair in a single tail on top. Mishil recognized the two of them. They were two of the girls from the forest's edge who helped Asuta run his business with the stalls.

The black-haired one spoke to Mishil in a fluster, "Could you please sell the gigo and chatchi reserved for Asuta to us?"

"You plan to keep doing business despite what's going on right now?"

"Yes," the black-haired girl replied with a big nod. "Asuta is sure to return. Until then, we intend to keep the business he's built here in the post town going in his place."

"Hmph... I can't imagine you'll manage to sell much with all this commotion."

"Actually, our customers from the east and south came by just the same as always. And when the westerners saw that, a few of them started cautiously

approaching us as well. We can't let the bonds Asuta forged here in Genos be severed."

Despite her childish face, there was a strong light shining in her eyes. Even though she was a woman, and a young one at that, she was still a person of the forest's edge all the same. Mishil took her hand off her wagon and held it out toward the girl.

"Two gigo and thirty chatchi will be nineteen red coins."

"Right, thank you. Could you keep bringing the same number of vegetables you promised Asuta for the next few days as well?"

"All right," Mishil replied, accepting the girl's coins.

You could only ever sell this many vegetables all at once here in the post town to an inn that especially favored you. That Asuta kid had undoubtedly earned a great deal of money using this gigo, chatchi, and giba meat. He had often said that he was just trying to bring prosperity to the settlement at the forest's edge, where so many were suffering in poverty.

"Okay, we'll be counting on you from tomorrow on... Lala, let's return to the stalls for now and drop these off."

"Yeah, got it."

With that, the girls swiftly departed. They must have been on their way to the inns. After all, that was where Asuta always went next after stopping by Mishil's street shop at around this time each day.

But will it really be possible for someone else to take that foolish kid's place?

Mishil once again grabbed onto the handle of her wagon and started pushing it back to the Daleim lands.

When she made it home, she found her son waiting there for her, his face pale.

"You're finally back, ma! If you had been out any later, I would've sent someone to go get you!"

"What are you doing, lazing around at this hour? What about the fields?"

“The others are taking care of them. But I’ve been busy asking around about what’s going on in the post town.”

Apparently, news of the morning’s commotion had already made it out here to the Daleim lands. Whether he had heard the news from soldiers on patrol or merchants who had visited the castle town, her son seemed to know more of the details than she did.

“Supposedly, the people of the forest’s edge have been searching both the post town and the Turan lands looking for their kidnapped comrade and the guys who snatched him. But if the culprit’s a noble, then they’re just wasting their time no matter where they look... Ugh, what’s going to become of Genos?”

“There’s no point in whining about it. The most we can do is make sure all the giba traps are properly set up.”

“A-Are the people of the forest’s edge really going to leave Genos? If they do, it’s going to make a complete mess out of our lives!”

If the people of the forest’s edge disappeared, the men of the Daleim lands could be forced to start fumbling their way through trying to act as hunters. Or they could build a fence, like the one in the Turan lands. Either way, they wouldn’t be able to continue on as they had until now.

“Damn it. Why is this happening to us? Is the lord of the house of Turan behind this after all? They’ve got a sturdy wall protecting their fields, so does he just not care what happens with the people of the forest’s edge?”

“As if a wooden barricade could actually hold back a giba for long. The only ones who will truly be safe are those who live behind the castle town’s walls of stone.”

“But they fill their stomachs with the vegetables we grow too! You can’t live on just the fuwano and mamaria from the Turan lands alone!”

That was obvious to just about everyone. Everyone except the people who lived in the castle town, that is. Mishil could easily imagine them thinking that all the vegetables they could ever want would always be available, just popping up out of the ground, no effort required.

“Whatever. Stop complaining. It’s pointless. Making a fuss about it before anything has even happened won’t do anything to change our fates, now will it? We just have to keep quiet and do our jobs.”

“Wh-Where are you going, ma?”

“To the fields, of course. It didn’t seem like I’d be able to do much business in the post town, so I came back early, but I still have to dig up the gigo for my next trip.”

“You’re not planning on going tomorrow, are you?” her son asked, looking completely shaken as Mishil glared up at him.

“I still managed to sell a whole lot of gigo and chatchi today, even with everything going on. There’s no telling what might happen from here on out, though, so I’ve got to sell what I can while the selling is good.”

“B-But...”

“You’ve really got no guts at all, do you? Those girls from the forest’s edge have far, far more spirit than you seem to be able to muster.”

With that, Mishil headed to the gigo field, leaving her son standing there looking completely pale.

The people of the forest’s edge hadn’t given up on doing business, so why should she? It didn’t make sense to just give up now, when she hadn’t even lost any money yet.

We’ve just got to keep going with our own work.

It wasn’t as if she was thinking something like, “For the sake of those who can’t anymore.”

What was that black-haired kid with goofy smile doing right at that moment, wherever he was?

Giving her aching hips a pat, Mishil walked forward along the dry dirt path.



Four days passed, and on each one, those girls from the forest’s edge stopped by Mishil’s shop to buy vegetables. Meanwhile, the other people of the forest’s

edge were still running about all over the place.

On the fourth day, the culprit's identity was finally revealed. Apparently, it wasn't the lord of house Turan himself, but rather his daughter, and a rumor was quickly spreading that the second son of the house of Daleim had aided the people of the forest's edge in their efforts to rescue Asuta.

How ridiculous. The Turan and Daleim are both noble houses, but in terms of strength, they couldn't be more different.

The head of the Daleim was nothing but a yes-man when it came to dealing with the house of Turan. It had long felt like it was actually Count Turan who determined how the vegetables grown in the Daleim lands were to be sold, and it was rumored that the reason no fence to protect the Daleim lands had been built was because the house of Turan had forbidden it, so it was impossible to imagine the second son of the house of Daleim being able to do anything about the tyrannical acts of the house of Turan. This would surely lead to the complete collapse of the relationship between the people of the forest's edge and the nobles of Genos.

Even so, it didn't change what Mishil had to do: leave the turbulent post town behind, work in the fields until it got dark, eat dinner with family, and sleep. Then, the next morning, she would spend a few hours after the break of dawn working the fields, load the necessary number of vegetables into her wagon, head to the post town, deliver vegetables to the inns she was connected to, and finally open her street shop. She set up her leather canopy on its thin wooden posts, spread a cloth out over the ground, and laid several sample vegetables on it. Then, after a fair number of customers had come and gone, *they* finally appeared.

"Sorry about how long it's been. And for disappearing so suddenly."

It was a certain young fellow from the forest's edge who seemed to be a foreigner, judging from his odd combination of ivory white skin like a westerner's, with black hair and eyes. He was also wearing the same goofy grin as always. In other words, it was Asuta of the Fa clan, accompanied by six hunters from the forest's edge.

He had such a foolish-looking smile on his face. His cheeks seemed to have

grown a good bit thinner, but his black eyes were shining just as brightly as they had before.

For a good long while, Mishil was left at a loss for words, but eventually she gave a flustered snort. “I never figured I’d see your face again. You sure do have some terrible luck, kid.”

“Yeah. But thanks to everyone from the forest’s edge and the post town, I made it back safely.”

Mishil hadn’t done a thing. She’d just kept running her business, the same as always.

“I heard that you’ve been selling the gigo and chatchi that I had been ordering to the women from the Ruu clan while I was away. Um... As long as things go well, I should be able to go back to work tomorrow, so could you sell that amount of gigo to me again?”

“Huh? Those girls already bought the gigo for tomorrow while they were moving their stalls.”

“Ah, no. Since the Ruu clan has been running the stalls on their own, I figured I should open a new separate business, so we’re going to need a lot more gigo than before...”

He looked incredibly apologetic and worried, as he always did when asking for something. And so, Mishil went ahead and shouted back at him the same as always too.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to think so little of me or my farm?! As long as you have the coins, I’ll sell you ten, twenty, or however many you need!”

“Thank you,” Asuta of the Fa clan said with a beaming smile.

It was currently the tenth of the white month, so it had already been more than a month and a half since she had met this young fellow with the strange appearance.

Her life, or this kid’s luck: which one was going to run out first? Ultimately, as Mishil retrieved some especially fine gigo from the wagon behind her, she

decided it wasn't really worth thinking about.

Afterword

Thank you so much for picking up this book, the twenty-first volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

It's currently the last third of May as I'm writing this afterword, and the havoc wrought by the coronavirus finally seems to be winding down. I can't even imagine what the world will look like when this volume is published toward the end of June, but I hope that we'll be even closer to returning to the peace and tranquility we used to have by then.

When the world is thrown into chaos and it takes all you have to make it through each day, it's important to always find some time to enjoy creative works. A good story can give you the energy you need to keep going, or soothe your heart.

I fall into the latter category. I've been enjoying many different works of fiction in order to bolster my strength so that I could continue working on my own series, and it would make me very happy if my work helped to bring you at least a little rest and relaxation in turn.

Now then, as for the volume itself, it picks up immediately after the last one ended, with the sun god's revival festival at its core. When you include the preparations for opening the outdoor restaurant, the festival part of the story has really been going on for quite a while, but here it finally reaches its climax.

It also marks the end of a long year for Asuta and company. From Asuta's perspective, it's only been around seven months or so, but that doesn't change the fact that it's a turning point. I'm sure that he must be looking forward to the year ahead of him and feeling renewed.

I suppose the next important date would be Asuta's birthday, the twenty-fourth of the yellow month, when he appeared at the forest's edge. In the setting of the story, there's a leap month which occurs once every three years, so Asuta's birthday will be in roughly half a year.

Since I have some room to spare in this afterword, I'll write a little about the world's calendar. The new year begins with the silver month, while the leap month that gets added after it is the gold. Then you have the brown, red, vermilion, yellow, green, blue, white, gray, black, indigo, and violet months.

Asuta arrived at the end of the yellow month, the clan head meeting was in the blue month, and the showdown with Cyclaeus was at the end of the white month. Then he met Myme and Varkas, traveled to Dabagg, and acted as support in the effort to deal with the lord of the forest, before finally arriving at the violet month.

It was an extremely busy seven months, and the days to come are going to be just as full. I hope you'll all continue joining everyone on their journey.

For the bonus short story, I decided to focus on Jiza Ruu.

The idea was to show Asuta during the revival festival from an unexpected point of view. I figured it would be fun to go with someone who stood opposed to him and ultimately settled on the heir to the Ruu clan.

Asuta finds Jiza Ruu incredibly difficult to read, so it felt meaningful to be able to show his internal thoughts, which would normally never be on display in the main story. Hopefully, I managed to show you all at least some of the emotions swirling just under the surface behind his narrowed eyes.

Then we have the final Group Performance story, centered on Granny Mishil.

When she finally showed up in this volume, a lot of folks might have thought, "Wait, has this character been part of the story before now?" As a matter of fact, she really hasn't appeared in the main story prior to this, even though her name's been mentioned many times, with the first one being all the way back in the fourth volume.

Since Dora doesn't sell gigo and chatchi at his place, Asuta has to purchase them from elsewhere. Dora recommended Granny Mishil's place, as her gigo were known to be especially plump and sweet. Ever since then, Asuta has always bought his gigo and chatchi from her. Gigo are like yams, while chatchi are similar to potatoes, so they're very important vegetables for Asuta's

business.

It also makes me pretty happy to have a character who appeared in name only back in volume four serve as the main character of a bonus story in volume twenty-one. This can only be the will of the mother forest and the four great gods.

At any rate, with this, the curtain has finally closed on the Group Performance stories, which began back in volume fourteen. There have been thirteen of them, with a total word count equivalent to 1.6 volumes, so thank you for sticking with these very long bonus stories.

That said, I've been writing more Group Performances every other year for the web version, so it's almost time to unveil the second round for the print version. I'm thinking of including them in any volumes with pages to spare, so I hope you'll be looking forward to their return.

Let me finish by thanking everyone involved with the production of this book, and of course, all of you who purchased it.

See you again in the next volume!

May 2020,

EDA

Bonus Short Story

At the Sudra House

“You certainly look like you’re enjoying yourself, Yun.”

A voice called out to Yun Sudra as she was in the midst of preparing dinner on the Sudra house’s outdoor stove. When she turned to look, she found the clan head’s wife, Li Sudra, standing there with a smile.

As Yun Sudra added fresh firewood to the stove, she sent the older woman a smile of her own and replied, “I am! I’ve been having so much fun lately that I’m sure anyone could tell how happy I am just by looking at my face. But don’t worry, my heart hasn’t gone all mushy too.”

“Yes, I know I needn’t worry about that when it comes to you, Yun,” Li Sudra said, her smiling growing gentler as she stepped closer. She was with child, and her belly already seemed to have grown a bit larger, which made Yun Sudra feel even happier.

“Shouldn’t you be sleeping, Li? We have dinner preparations covered, so please get your rest. You don’t need to push yourself.”

“Oh my... I’m still several months away from giving birth. Being idle for such a long time would have a negative impact on my child, without a doubt,” Li Sudra replied, staring at Yun Sudra with a kindly gaze. The younger girl was especially fond of that look.

Though the two of them were both members of the Sudra clan, they were barely related by blood at all. Yun Sudra had come from a former Sudra subordinate clan, the Meema, so her blood ties were especially thin.

However, Yun Sudra had never felt left out because of that. She didn’t have any living parents or siblings, but the same could be said for nearly all of the nine members of her clan. Every last one of them was equally precious to her as a part of her family whom she had lived with hand in hand all this time.

Along the way, Yun Sudra had become especially fond of Li Sudra. They were only ten years apart in age, but the older woman was always so calm and composed and had such a strong core, plus she was kind to everyone. That was why Yun Sudra secretly looked up to her a lot.

“Still, are *you* all right, Yun? You’ve been working non-stop ever since the sun god’s revival festival began,” Li Sudra commented with a concerned expression.

“I’m totally fine!” Yun Sudra replied with a bright smile. “Honestly, the busier it’s gotten, the more fun each day has been. I’m so glad that I’ve been allowed to help Asuta with his work.”

“That’s because you’re more passionate than anyone when it comes to manning the stove. You’re the greatest chef in the whole Sudra clan at this point,” Li Sudra remarked, once again showing a gentle smile. “Asuta has told us that you’ve been doing really well. Just please take care not to push yourself too hard, Yun.”

“Yeah, I know! You wanted to keep helping Asuta too, didn’t you, Li?”

“Well, of course. But I’ve been granted an even greater blessing than that, so I certainly won’t complain,” Li Sudra said as she lovingly stroked her stomach, which had been getting bigger and bigger by the day.

Li Sudra had given birth twice before. However, the souls of both those children had returned to the forest at a young age, all because of the terrible poverty the Sudra clan had been enduring at the time. They’d had few clan members to their name and had always been starving, since they hadn’t been able to hunt a sufficient number of giba. As such, it had proven impossible for them to produce enough milk and food to feed a young child.

Yun Sudra could still clearly remember the times when they had lost those two. She herself had bawled her eyes out, as had Li Sudra and the clan head, Raielfam Sudra... Every last member of the Sudra had shed tears of grief over the deaths of their little ones. To a clan on the verge of destruction, children were their one and only hope, and yet that hope had been mercilessly taken away.

But even then, Li Sudra had never allowed herself to just fall to pieces. She had forced down her grief and sorrow, which ran deeper than anyone else’s,

and simply shed her tears in silence.

As she recalled Li Sudra's calm crying face, Yun Sudra's chest felt tight. So, in order to keep herself from starting to weep now, she smiled instead.

"I'll be sure to feed your kid lots of delicious food full of giba meat once they're born! And until then, I'll make sure to keep polishing my skills every day!"

"Thank you. But you're already fifteen yourself, Yun... By the time my child is big enough to eat solid food, you might already be married and pregnant with a child of your own."

"Huh? I'm still a long way off from getting married. I won't have time for it until your child has grown up a little."

"My... You sure can be troublesome at times," Li Sudra remarked, a different shine now showing in her eyes than before. "Of course, there's no need to rush into getting married... But please don't treat your own happiness so lightly, Yun. You're far too kind, so I find myself worrying about that sort of thing now and then."

"I'm not treating it lightly. And I'm nowhere near as kind as you..."

"Really? You don't find it difficult at all, working under Asuta?"

"Huh?" Yun Sudra said, her eyes going wide and her face rapidly heating up. "Er, Li... You know how I feel about him?"

"It's obvious, even at a glance, seeing how you look at him."

Yun Sudra felt so embarrassed that she wanted to just vanish into thin air. However, she wasn't going to do anything that would make Li Sudra worry about her, so she somehow managed to maintain the smile on her face.

"I-I really am totally fine. If Asuta and Ai Fa get married...I'll smile and give them my blessing. That's what I decided."

"So it isn't painful for you, being by Asuta's side? If you're letting yourself suffer for the sake of the Sudra clan..."

"That's not it at all! I truly am enjoying each and every day," Yun Sudra replied, speaking from the bottom of her heart. Lying was considered a crime at

the forest's edge, but she had no need to do so in the first place. "I really respect Asuta, so I'm incredibly grateful to have this opportunity to work under him. And if that means I can become a fine chef who brings joy to everyone in the Sudra clan with my delicious food...nothing would make me happier than that. I give my thanks to the mother forest for allowing me to meet Asuta."

"I see..." Li Sudra said, reaching out toward Yun Sudra's head. Her graceful fingers gently stroked the younger girl's hair. Their warmth caused tears to unwittingly slip from Yun Sudra's eyes.

"Will I be able to become a wonderful person like you, Li...?"

"You're already so wonderful that anyone would be proud to know you, Yun. Just like *I'm* proud to have you as a member of my family."

Yun Sudra smiled up at the older woman as brightly as she could, even as tears were streaming down her face out of control, and Li Sudra continued to look down at her with unending kindness in her eyes.



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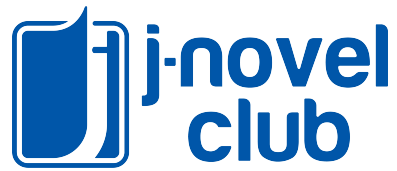
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 21

by EDA

Translated by Gwendolyn Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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